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"He's Hit," Sergeant Lace Cries suddenly. And indeed He Is Hit *See page* 101

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COVERED WITH MUD AND GLORY

A Machine Gun Company in Action

("MA MITRAILLEUSE")

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BY

GEORGES LAFOND

SERGEANT-MAJOR, TERRITORIAL HUSSARS, FRENCH ARMY; INTELLIGENCE OFFICER, MACHINE GUN SECTIONS, FRENCH COLONIAL INFANTRY

With a Preface by MAURICE BARRÈS
of the French Academy

Translated by EDWIN GILE RICH

INCLUDING

"A TRIBUTE TO THE SOLDIERS OF FRANCE"

BY

GEORGES CLEMENCEAU

SCIRE · QVOD SCIENDVM

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To the Memory of

My Comrades of the second company of machine guns
of the . . . first Colonials

who fell at the battle of the Somme in July, 1916,
and of the Aisne in April, 1917;

To

Lieutenants Maisonnave and Dupouy

in remembrance of the hours of fine, sincere comradeship we lived together;

To

Denys Maurin

the quartermaster-sergeant, wounded heroically before Soissons, in testimony of a sincere friendship which was born under shell-fire, which grew amid the horrors of grim madness, and which was firmly fixed through sharing common hopes and common joys;

I dedicate these simple pages
which are only a modest contribution to
the monumental narrative which these
anonymous epics of every day would make

A TRIBUTE TO THE SOLDIERS OF FRANCE

By Georges Clemenceau

I WATCH our blue-uniformed men at war, as they pass with a friendly and serious look, generously covered with mud. This is the artillery — slow marching — which is moving its cannon under a fantastic camouflage, a mockery of reality. A glistening slope of soaked earth is set in a frame of shattered trees, twisted into indescribable convulsions of anguish with the gaping wounds inflicted by the storm of iron. On their horses, already covered with winter shag, the poilus, slouched in all sorts of positions, having no suggestion of the rigid form of the manœuvre, are going from one battlefield to another without any other thought except that of just keeping on going.

In colorless and shapeless uniforms, indescribably rigged out, and in poses of the most pleasurable leisure, the soldiers of France picturesquely slip from glory to glory, less aware, it seems, of historic grandeur than of serene gladness in implacable duty. They are picturesque because nature will have it so, but without any romanticism or sense of posing — officers hardly to be distinguished from privates by vague, soiled stripes — all the men enveloped in a halo of splendor above anything known to ordinary humanity.

The pugnacious pipe or the sportive cigarette hinders their expression of any personal reflection. Only their eyes are animate, and these express things which cannot be told in words lest they be profaned. The line of their lip is youthful under a silky moustache or firm with age under gray brush. But the fire of their look, framed in their dark helmets, leaps out with quiet intensity to meet the tragic unknown that no longer can bring surprise. They are our soldiers of the year II who are following the Biblical column of fire. They see something. They go to it. Ashamed of my humility, I should like to find words to say to them. But, were I a poet, they would have no need of hearkening to me, since the greatest beauty of man lies in them, and since, unwitting of utterance, which at best seems inept, these men live on the summits of life.

And the "old classes" who prosaically break stone at the side of the road or work with the shovel, the pickaxe, the broom, making the toilette of the road of triumph, what an injustice if I did not mention them! How does it happen that the noblest soldier is always the one I chance upon? That is the miracle of these men; and when I tell you that on the battlefield of the Aisne the "old classes," not granting that it was necessary to wait to the end of the battle before beginning to clear and rebuild, went off into the hottest of the action to fill up craters, to break stones, to place tree-trunks and beams during heavy fire, without vouchsafing the Boche a single hasty gesture, so that they might the more quickly open the way for revictualling and for the bringing up of artillery — when I tell you this, you will admit that they do not deserve a lesser greeting than their "young ones."

could he commit

And the infantryman — could I commit the supreme injustice of forgetting him? That is impossible when one has gone over the battleground where he has taken possession of the burrows of the Boches, among heaps of munition material, cases of supplies, an indescribable débris, abandoned with their dead and wounded in the haste of a desperate fight. What we cannot understand is that our little poilu can pass so quickly from the apathy of the trench to the extreme fury of the attack, and then from the violence of the offensive to the calm smile of a victory of which his modesty seems to say: "It was as easy as all that."

I did not hear a single boast, or see a disagreeable act, or hear a word that sounded false. Like a good-hearted proprietor returning home, they took possession of the shelters of the Boche so hurriedly abandoned. Here can be found the comforts of war, if these two words can be spoken together. The men talk in groups at the openings of the underground passages, camouflaged by the enemy himself. The indifference of their attitudes, the ease of their familiar conversation, in which there mingle no bragging (though this is the place for it), are more characteristic of the situation of some simple bourgeois who have happened to meet on Sunday in the street. A major begs my pardon for wearing a collared shirt, which is not perfectly "regular" at an official review. Messengers pass, throwing out a word or making a simple sign. Officers step up for brief explanations. A half-salute, a nodding of the head — it is over. Not far away, on the road cut into the rock, where the stupid Boche, after our passings, sends his impotent shells, our always young "old classes" hang on to the slopes in order to see the projectile fall, and make uncomplimentary remarks about the gunner. Then work is resumed till the next warning whistles in the air.

It is after twelve and we have not yet dined. A big devil of a Moroccan colonel, with a Don Quixotic face under an extraordinary headpiece, invites us to his P. C. (post of command), where the Boche has left useful bits of installation. A black hole is two steps away from us. We go down into the ground, over abrupt descents, and there we are protected from the "marmites" in a dark corridor lit by candles stuck into the mouths of German gas masks. We sit down on anything handy (I even have the favor of a chair), before a board which also serves as the colonel's bed, while arms whose body remains invisible serve us with dishes not to be disdained by a gourmand. How did they get there? I cannot undertake to explain that. The walk in the open air, the tragic nature of the place, the joy in land reconquered, no doubt all lend particular spice to the comradeship of these men who forget that they have done great deeds as soon as they have done them. Pictures and illustrated pages tremble in the fluttering candle-lights, among them a Victorious France, drawn by the pencil of the colonel. A telephonist measures out mouthfuls of conversation to a military post that sends in observations and receives ours. Long time or short time, for here hours and minutes are alike, here is a magic that ends too soon. We must go.

The colonel would have been perfect if he had not made it a point of honor to avoid all danger for his civilian visitor. In the morning he had tried to forbid me a flying visit to the marvellous castle of Pinion, but he finally understood that even a soldier has to be born a civilian and that he should not therefore scorn his own origin. The trip was accomplished without the shadow of an incident, but the colonel, who insists more than ever on the rights and privileges of the uniform, will not permit me to return until the Boche cannon favors us with a little respite. The Boche can hardly make up his mind to such a favor; hence, several false departures and changings of direction. Finally, the colonel lets us go under the guard of a robust sergeant-major, who even yesterday magnificently led his stretcher-bearers to the aid of the wounded under the hottest fire. Although he is not of the youngest class, he has refused to be retired from the front. He is spoken of only with respect, I might say admiration. "He goes everywhere." He is fine, genial company., After many necessary little zigzags, a walk that is not very strenuous and very soon over, I left the brave sergeant, whom I shall always remember.

I cannot finish this inconsequent account without speaking of the touching ceremony which I witnessed at Soissons, the terribly bombarded. Since the victory of Malmaison the city has been out of range. But when you have seen the building of the sub-prefect tottering with shell-holes, a building that neither the sub-prefect nor his wife has left, the shortest walk will tell you a long tale.

The general, who is a good fellow — I take pleasure in saying that — had proposed to show me something, and so here I am in a public square having the imposing silhouette of the cathedral as a background. From the height of the great towers, with their wide wounds, history, attentive, looks down. Everywhere there is a formidable display of cannon taken from the enemy. There are piles of them, heaps of them. There are too many to count, together with a bewildering mass of trench instruments of all sorts. Can you believe it? They do not hold the eye. How is that possible? Because on the sidewalk opposite, in splendid alignment, is the gorgeous gathering of soldiers with medals and decorations who have captured these things. Ah! They hold the eye! There they are, with all sorts of faces and from all branches of the service, with the flag which they have followed into battle and which now must be present at their honor.

To be quite honest, the group is not so æsthetic as a picture of Versailles. These men are too great for much ceremony. With a jerky step the general advances; his brusque movements reveal the homage of his emotion before the bravest of the brave. Slowly he passes along the line, while the adjutant reads in a stirring voice the high deeds in the citations. And the military medal quivers on each noble breast at the recollection of the tremendous drama lived through. And the general utters a comrade's congratulation, shakes a friendly hand, expresses a good wish. Then the flag salutes, while the drums rumble in these hearts drunk with love of country. At the greeting of the flag of the glorious Chasseurs, a rag torn by machine guns, something gets hold of our throats, which the trumpets hurt with their sublime peal. If there are more beautiful spectacles, I do not know them. One minute here is worth years.

And I have said nothing of the people about, silent, all in mourning, their souls full of tears, which finally brim over. Men, hats off, motionless as statues, proud of becoming great through their children. Mothers, with seared faces, superbly stoic under the eye of the greater maternity of the great country. The children in the ecstasy of feeling about them something greater than they can understand, but already certain that they will understand some day this immortal hour.

And not a cry, not a word sounds in the air, nothing but the great silence of the courage of all of them. Then everyone goes away, firm and erect, to a glorious destiny. In every heart La France has passed.

NOTE. — A few days before M. Clemenceau, premier of France, was called to power, he returned from a visit to the Aisne front and published his impressions in his paper, *L'Homme Enchainé*, now *L'Homme Libre*. When he became premier, *L'Illustration* republished this "Tribute to the Soldiers of France," and it has since been widely reproduced and admired throughout France. The present English translation by Harry Kurz was printed in the *New York Tribune*, to the editors of which grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint here.

PREFACE

SERGEANT-MAJOR GEORGES LAFOND, of the Territorial Hussars, the author of this book, was in South America at the time of mobilization. He returned to France as soon as possible and joined his corps, but asked to be assigned as intelligence officer to the machine-gun sections of the . . . first regiment of Colonial Infantry.

With this picked corps, which has been decimated several times, he took part in the engagements in Champagne, on the Somme, at Lihons, Dompierre, Herbècourt, and notably in the days from the first to the fifth of July, where the regiment earned its second citation and received the *fourragère.*

Lafond was discharged after the battles of Maisonnette, and wrote this book of recollections in the hospital at Abbeville, and afterwards at Montpellier, where he had to undergo a severe operation.

PREFACE

Sergeant-Major Lafond's narrative makes no claim to literary pretension, but it is simply a collection of actual occurrences. It is a series of short narratives which give the life of a company of machine gunners from the day of its formation to the hour when it was so decimated that it had to be reorganized with men from other corps.

What pictures the following titles call to mind: "A Reconnaissance in the Fog," "The Aeroplane," "Our First Engagement," "'We Have Taken a Picket Post,'" "The Attack," "The Echelon," "A Water Patrol"! No man who has lived at the front and has taken part in an attack will fail to recognize the accuracy of these narratives and to experience, as well, emotion, enthusiasm, and pride in having been among "those who were there."

This record of adventure was very successful when it appeared in the *Petit Parisien*, and I feel sure that it will be successful in book form. I beg Sergeant-Major Georges Lafond to accept my hearty congratulations on his fine talent and his bravery.

MAURICE BARRÈS,
of the French Academy.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

I THE SEARCH FOR MY COMPANY . . . 1
II THE QUARTERMASTER'S BILLETS . . . 11
III THE ECHELON 21
IV THE SONG OF THE MACHINE GUN . . 31
V A RECONNAISSANCE IN THE FOG . . . 47
VI OUR FIRST ENGAGEMENT 58
VII EASTER EGGS 71
VIII THE AEROPLANE 89
IX DAYS IN CANTONMENT 103
X AN ORDINARY FATIGUE PARTY 122
XI WITH MUSIC 135
XII "WE HAVE TAKEN A PICKET POST" . 148
XIII A NIGHT CONVOY 164
XIV THE SONGS OF THE HOMELAND. . . . 175
XV A WATER PATROL 188
XVI A COMMANDER 199
XVII THE ATTACK 217
XVIII WITH ORDERS 232
XIX A WREATH 250
XX DISCHARGED 261

ILLUSTRATIONS

"He's Hit," Sergeant Lace Cries suddenly. And indeed He Is Hit . . . . . . PAGE *Frontispiece*
Remains of Villages near the Lines . . . 36
A Poilu 56
A sinister Grumbling Seemed to Shatter the Fog 110
The front line Trench 154
A Commandant's Post 166
The least dangerous Passage Is the unprotected Ground 186
The Attack 226

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CHAPTER I

THE SEARCH FOR MY COMPANY

I REMEMBER the exact date and I have reason to, for on that Monday, February fifteenth, I joined the second company of machine guns of the . . . first Colonials at the front. It was snowing and the fields of Picardy were one vast white carpet on which the auto-trucks traced a multitude of black lines to the accompaniment of pyrotechnics of mud.

Two days before I had left my depot in a small garrison town in the center of Provence, which lay smiling in the sun and already bedecked with the first flowers of spring. At Lyons I found rain, at Saint-Just-en-Chaussee, snow, and I got off the train in a sea of mud.

In the dim light of a February dawn, the station at Villers appeared to be encumbered with the supplies of half-a-dozen regiments. My car was high on its wheels and at the end of the train farthest from the unloading platform. At the other end of the platform near the entrance to the station, I found a rolling bridge for unloading animals, but it was useless to ask those busy people to help me push this weighty contrivance to the car.

So I looked at Kiki — Kiki is my horse — who had but recently arrived from Canada and was scarcely broken after his two months' training at the depot.

" Kiki, *mon vieux,*" I said, " you must make up your mind to do as I did and jump. Remember that you are a Canadian, and every self-respecting Canadian should know how to jump as soon as he is born."

I delivered this kind invitation from the ground and I urged him on by pulling on the reins. Kiki was not at all frightened. He came to the edge of the car, snuffed the air, carefully calculated the distance, bent lightly on his hind legs, and jumped to the ground without a flutter.

" The . . . first Colonials ? " the military commissioner said to me. " I don't know exactly, but you 'll find it somewhere along twenty or thirty miles to the east at Proyart or Harbonnières, or perhaps at Morcourt. There 's a little of it all about there."

So Kiki and I, in the morning mist, went slowly along roads covered with snow and grease in search of the second company of machine guns.

Proyart is a small village hidden in a hollow of this plain of Picardy which from a distance resembled a well-stretched, vast white carpet. Here the villages are sheltered in depressions and one only sees them when he reaches the level of their steeples. It was at Proyart that altogether accidentally, thanks to a sign about as large as my hand and already partly rubbed out, I found the staff of the . . . first Colonials.

An orderly condescended to move a few steps and point out to me at the end of the street to the right the billets of the quartermaster of the second company of machine guns.

There was a court — a sewer, as a matter of fact — which was completely filled by a pool of filth which left only a narrow passage of a foot or two by each wall. In a corner was a tangle of barrels, farm implements, and broken boxes, and on that a mass of wet straw, manure, snow, and mud.

At the farther end of the court was a small door with glass panels — with a glass panel — for only one remained. The spaces were conveniently filled by thick layers of the *Petit Parisien, Matin, Le Journal, Echo de Paris,* the great dailies which arrived intermittently at Proyart.

I went in. Kiki wanted to go in, too, but the door was low and he was carrying his complete pack. Inside was a ruined kitchen. The chimney still remained, and there was a large table made of a door stretched on two barrels, which took up the middle of the room. In each corner, against the walls, were improvised beds, straw mattresses, and heaps of clothes under which I surmised there were bodies.

"The door, nom de Dieu!" shouted a voice.

In front of the chimney was a man struggling desperately with a fire. The watersoaked wood refused to burn, and the man flooded it with shoe grease, which, when it melted, threw out jets of yellow flame and filled the room with a pungent odor and smoke.

"The door, the door! What did he tell you!"

cried in different tones voices which came from the heaps of covers.

It was true that a breath of cold air and a swirl of snow had rushed into the smoky dark hall when I came in. I shut the door and asked,

"Is this the second company of machine guns?"

"What of it? What do you want of the second machine guns? It 's here. And after that what do you want? Papers, again? Zut! They have no idea of bothering people at this hour. Leave them on the table and come back in half an hour."

This diatribe emanated from a pile thicker than the rest, in the chimney corner. At this obsession of papers, of lists to be signed, I guessed he was a sergeant or a quartermaster, and I kept on:

"Don't worry. There are no papers. I am the mounted intelligence officer attached to this company."

"M . . .!" shouted several voices in the four corners of the room, while I watched arms and muffled heads rise up.

"*Mince!* So we have a mounted officer now! Wonderful! They 're certainly fitting us out in style. What won't they do next? Then, that 's all right, *vieux*. Come on in and let us see you. And you have a horse? Where is your horse? Bring him in; make him come. It must be cold out in the court."

The first burst of curiosity soon passed, the torrent of words exhausted itself, and the forms which had stirred a moment ago quieted down anew. A more peremptory voice now started in shouting invectives at the orderly who was still struggling with the rebellious wood.

"Say, Dedouche. Do you think we 're Boche sausages that you want to smoke us out? Don't you know anything? We 'll have to wear glasses. That 's no way to light a fire. What did you learn when you were a boy?"

"The grease is full of water and won't even burn."

"Use the oil in the lamp, then."

The first result of the immediate execution of this order was to fill the room with a black stifling cloud which was enough to make one weep. In the middle of this smoke the orderly, Dedouche, coughed, spat, sputtered, while I heard him storm:

“In God’s name, how that stinks! How that stinks!”

The quartermaster, doubtless on account of the smoke and the smell, now deigned to get up. He was a young man, large, light complexioned, and his cheeks were red and fat. He had just a suspicion of a moustache. His ears were hidden in a cap which had wings that pulled down. One could scarcely see his eyes they were so puffed out with sleep and smoke.

“So you ’re the intelligence officer? Sit down. Dedouche, make a cup of coffee. I ’ll make a note of your transfer, and then you can try to find a place for yourself until the lieutenant comes. Oh, you ’ve time, you know. He never comes before ten o’clock.”

“But, Quartermaster, it ’s nearly ten now.”

“No, you ’re joking. Ten o’clock. My word, it ’s true. Oh, there, get up all of you. It ’s ten o’clock. And that salaud of a Dedouche has n’t lighted the fire. Come, come, hurry up, the lieutenant is coming!”

And as though this were the magic word, the lieutenant came in, leaving the door wide open behind him. It was time; they were almost suffocated.

The lieutenant was a large man, thin and well set up. His bearing indicated resolution. His brown hair was cut very short, according to the regulations. A close-cropped black moustache streaked his sunburned face. The general effect of his personality was that of a man cool and headstrong.

"Oh, he has the coolness of a Colonial," the machine gunners repeated *ad nauseam*.

"Is n't there any way to get you up?" exclaimed the lieutenant. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. It 's after ten o'clock."

Then he saw me through the cloud of smoke and questioned me with a glance. The quartermaster broke in before I could reply,

"It 's the mounted intelligence officer, Lieutenant."

"Oh, good! . . . Good morning. . . . Welcome."

He extended a large, vigorous hand which confirmed the first impression of his personality — frankness and will.

"Have you found a place for your horse?" he asked.

"Not yet, Lieutenant. I 've just come."

I pointed out Kiki through the door to the courtyard where he waited, stoically and calmly, under the snow. Perhaps he remembered the times not long ago that he waited for hours at the doors of the ranch under more wintry winds. Perhaps he imagined that he was still waiting for the rough Canadian pioneer who tarried for long discussions about business, warming himself the while with whiskey. At any rate Kiki waited stoically and quietly. He scarcely condescended to welcome us by a glance when I presented him to the lieutenant, who stroked his head.

"This is Kiki, Lieutenant. I don't know his real name, for his record bore only his number, but that fits him and he seems to like it. He is a Canadian, seven years old, thin but strong, very gentle and a good jumper."

"He 's pretty. Come along. We 'll put him in with mine. They 'll get along all right together."

So I took Kiki by the bridle and the lieutenant and I went along talking, until we reached an improvised stable where the officer's horse and his groom were quartered.

Zèbre was a great brown horse, with a huge, calm face. Everything here certainly gives an impression of calmness.

I took leave of the officer for the time being and returned to the quartermaster's, where a steaming soup and scalding coffee were waiting for me. It was nearly noon and I had eaten nothing hot for the last forty-eight hours. It was four above zero and it was time.

CHAPTER II

THE QUARTERMASTER'S BILLETS

I WAS seated under a shed of loose boards in the courtyard of Cantonment No. 77, and just tasting some excellent macaroni which the cook had warmed up for me, when Dedouche, the orderly, came to find me.

"Say, Sergeant," he asked, "are you the intelligence officer?"

The title of "sergeant" sounds strange in the ears of a cavalryman, and I felt a little hurt in my *esprit de corps;* but I at once answered Dedouche's summons, for the orderly, in spite of being at the beck and call of everyone, enjoys a certain prestige. He has a real importance, small though it be, but an importance which carries weight when he gives his opinion in the discussions of the "little staff" of the company.

This staff is the household of the quartermaster's billets. With some slight differences it is in general composed of the quartermaster-sergeant, lacking a sergeant-major which companies of machine guns rarely have, a quartermaster-corporal, an adjutant and a mess corporal. I was admitted to the honor of taking part in the discussions of the staff on account of the detached and unusual character of my duties.

But Dedouche was summoning me. I turned and observed him leisurely. Dedouche is an excellent fellow. Without even knowing him one would guess it at first glance. He is good-natured, never in a hurry, no matter how urgent his errand, and indifferent alike to blows and invectives. He smiles under torrents of abuse and threats of the most terrible punishments, and does his duty as man of all work silently. In a word, he possesses all the qualities inherent in his duty. He is tall and spare; his face is beardless and sanctimonious; his eyes smile, but they look far away under his great round glasses with their large rims. All in all Dedouche looks like a lay brother. To complete the illusion, when he talks he has a habit of thrusting his hands into the large sleeves of his jacket and lowering his head to look over his spectacles. In civil life Dedouche was an assistant in a pharmacy in one of the large provincial cities. He knows the art of making up learned formulae. His long slim fingers manage the most fragile things with skill, and his grave voice is accustomed to the mezzotints of the laboratory.

" Yes," I answered at last, " it is I."

" The lieutenant wants you."

I gulped down my plate of macaroni in two mouthfuls, swallowed the coffee which the cook, already attentive to my wants, held out to me, and followed Dedouche the two hundred yards which separated us from the billets.

Two hundred yards is nothing, and yet it is a world. In less time than it takes to tell it I learned a mass of things from Dedouche.

First, what part of the country we are from. The . . . first Colonials was organized in the South. So, in the hope of finding in each newcomer another " countryman," Dedouche asked the new arrival at once,

" What part of the country are you from ? "

He had some doubt about my reply. A Hussar of a regiment with an unknown number, who had given little opportunity to study his accent, might be a man from the North or the East. " One never knows with these cavalrymen," he seemed to say, "they 're so uncertain." So he changed the form and varied his traditional question somewhat,

"You 're not from the South, by chance, Sergeant?"

At this repetition of his offense about my title, I thought that I ought to slip in a discreet observation, so I said,

"In the cavalry, my friend, the sergeant is called '*maréchal des logis*.'" And then having satisfied my slightly offended *esprit de corps,* I replied, "Yes, *mon vieux,* I am from the South, in fact from the Mediterranean, from L'Herault."

"How things happen!" exclaimed Dedouche. "I 'm from Le Clapas."

Le Clapas is the nickname given to Montpellier in the territory. And at that there came all at once a bewildering flow of words. Dedouche began to tell me, mixing it all up in an incredible confusion, about his birthplace, his adventures, his former regular occupation, in the depths of a pharmacy in a small street under the shadow of the University, his transfer from the auxiliary to active service, his wound in Champagne. All this was interspersed with frequent exclamations and repetitions, "Say, tell me, *Maréchal,* will this war ever be over?" and then regrets for his home land, "Say, tell me, *Logis,* would n't it be better down there in the good sun?"

In these different attempts to get nearer to the term "*maréchal de logis*," I observed Dedouche's obvious good will, but what interested me most was a little advance knowledge about the company.

So Dedouche sketched in a few words a picture of it, which was absolutely accurate, as I was able to appreciate later.

"The lieutenant is a very chic type. No one would think to look at him that he is from the South, too. He appears cold and hard, like that, but it 's not natural; he puts it on. He 's good-hearted at bottom. He 's a Basque and is n't afraid of anything. You ought to have seen him in Champagne at Massiges. Oh, and then we have besides his fellow countryman, Sub-Lieutenant Delpos, a blond. He 's not here now; he 's down at Morcourt with the echelon. He 's a type too, not stuck-up, but he 's agreeable and good-humored.

"Oh, those in the billets," Dedouche sketched with a vague wave of the hand, as if to say something like this: "They 're of no importance; they 're brothers, friends, and not worth talking about." Perhaps his gesture meant something else, but that 's what I thought it meant.

And as if he were responding to my implied question, he went on:

"— there is only the drummer who 's from the South, too; he 's what they call the 'quarter-master corporal,' I don't know why. He 's a good fellow, but he does not talk. At least he only talks rarely, and he 's from Marseilles, too; no one would think it to see him. He makes me mad most of the time.

"Oh, the rest! The corporal of infantry is from Paris. I don't know him. He only came five or six days ago. He has n't told us anything yet; he only sings. And what songs! Good God, they 're enough to make one blush!

"The *juteux* — the adjutant," interrupted Dedouche, for he rarely used slang. With the exception of "*pinard*" and "*tacot*," which have become hallowed and have taken an official place even in the most refined language of the armies, Dedouche rarely used a vulgar or misplaced word in his conversation. This was not because he was opposed to it nor from false modesty, but because his occupation as a "scientist" had given him the habit of using good language.

"The adjutant," went on Dedouche, "he 's not an adjutant. He 's a brother, a father, a friend, a man, what! Never a word of anger, never a punishment, always agreeable and kind. And in spite of that he 's had a career. He 's been in Morocco, China, and Madagascar, and no one knows where else. He 's been in the service eleven years, but you would n't think it to look at him."

This running biography brought us to the open door which framed the lieutenant's tall figure.

"Say, *Margis*" (the lieutenant knew his military terminology and this abbreviation was not without zest), "are you rested from your journey?"

"I was n't tired, Lieutenant."

"How about your horse?"

"No more than I was. Do you think that after three days stretched out on the straw in his car, without moving . . . ?"

"Then, if you are willing, we 'll both go to the echelon."

"All right, Lieutenant."

A question must have framed itself on my face, for he added almost at once:

"Yes, the echelon, the fighting train, the cavalry. You 'll be more at home there. We left it below at Morcourt, seven or eight miles away, on account of the shells that fall here sometimes. Horses, you know, cost more than men, so we have to economize them. It is understood, then? We 'll go about noon. Saddle both horses. Meet me here."

Then he strode off and joined a group of officers who were coming up the main street of the village to the church.

Dedouche was already full of attention for me — just think of a man from home on the "little staff" — and he now burst forth eagerly:

"Don't trouble yourself, *Logis.* I 'll tell the groom to saddle the horses and bring them here."

The smoke still persisted in the dark, littered confusion of the room, but combined with it now was an odor of burnt grease mixed with the moldy smell of a ragout with onions and strong cheese. In addition, spread out on the table, were the remnants of a meal, which had just been finished, the rolls, the account books and reports.

The quartermaster-corporal, the silent fellow from Marseilles, immersed in reading *Le Soleil du Midi,* did not even condescend to look up. In response to my friendly good-by, he let a scarcely perceptible " adieu " slip through his lips.

The quartermaster was stretched out on a dirty mattress thrown on the ground, and juggling two packages of English cigarettes, while he sang at the top of his lungs — and what a voice he had! — the latest song:

Mes amis, dans la vie
Faut faire des économies
Les journaux vous l'ont dit.
C'est aussi mon avis.

This intellectual refrain must have given him extreme pleasure, for he began it again and again without any interruption.

" Well," I said, " judging from the looks of things, you are n't often disturbed here? "

At this the drummer cast me a searching look, cold, disdainful and commiserating, as much as to say to me, “One can see that you ’ve just come!”

As for the quartermaster, he replied to everything in the repertoire of the *Eldorado.* Without stopping his juggling, he shouted at me in his amazing voice:

Moi! je m’en fous,
Je reste tranquil’ment
Dans mon trou! . . .

He was going on when the infernal noise of some aerial trolley tore through space.

“Attention!” he cried, without moving from his mattress. “There ’s the Metro!”

Almost at the same moment, a great shell, a “310” at least, burst in the court of the house opposite, demolished the roof, and crushed a dozen horses.

The adjutant was just crossing the street and he stopped at the door to estimate the damage.

“They missed the steeple again,” he said, with a disdainful shrug for the Boche artillery.

And Morin, the drummer, by way of commentary, without interrupting his reading:

“Close the door. If they send any more shells, that will make a draft.”

CHAPTER III

THE ECHELON

FROM Proyart to Morcourt is five miles by a crossroad which in its many curves and windings cuts across trenches, communication trenches and barbed wire.

The snow had stopped, but it still covered the ground, the trees and the farms with its regular white covering. The communication trenches showed black on this vast screen.

The crows circled in innumerable flights and sought in vain for the carrion which had been so abundant for months and which, to-day, was buried.

We went along, boot to boot, slowly, for the roads were slippery. Kiki wanted to dance about, for the keen air made him lively. But Zèbre's sedateness dismayed him, and Kiki wisely ranged alongside and regulated the pace by his.

The lieutenant talked but little — a few detached words, chopped phrases, about the company, an observation on the weather, a reflection on the horses.

The road was almost deserted save for a few Territorials, muffled in their sheepskins, who dragged along their heavy wooden shoes which were made even higher by a thick sole of snow. From time to time a company wagon, driven like an express train, grazed us with its wheels and splashed us with mud.

Then, abruptly, without having had to climb the slightest hill, we saw Morcourt, as one sees suddenly from the top of a cliff the sea at his feet, in the midst of the thousand windings of the Somme, of the canal and the turf-pits. Morcourt is a village scarcely as large as Proyart, and like it hidden in a gully sheltered from the winds on all sides, and also like it, hidden under the snow.

A blacksmith had set up his forge in the open air against the walls of a tottering tile-kiln. All around the snow had melted in great black puddles where the waiting horses had pawed the ground. The smoke from his fire rose red-tinted and dark in the heavy air which seemed to muffle the ring of the hammers on the anvil.

We come to a stop before a house nearly in ruins, whose tottering remains are a constant menace. A corporal rushes out — nimble, short and thick-set, a small Basque cap binding his sunburned forehead — and then some men come from the neighboring stables.

The houses in the country which were invaded for a short time and in which troops have had their cantonments for long weary months all look alike. Their doors and windows are gone, but these are replaced by tent canvas.

The drivers of the echelon and the war train in the machine-gun companies are nearly always sailors, the older classes of the Territorials, who after many changes have been assigned to the Colonial regiments. No one knows why, but it is probably because the bureaucratic, stay-at-home mental worker finds some relationship between the Colonials and the sea. And so they make these men, accustomed to the management of ships, infantrymen, or drivers, or even cavalrymen. But with the unfailing readiness and the ingenuity of their kind they make up so much for all that, that far from appearing unready and badly placed, one would say that they were veterans already broken to all the tricks of the trade.

Their long ship voyages and the necessities of critical hours have taught them to replace with the means at hand most things in material existence. From an old preserve box and a branch of a tree, squared and split with a hatchet, they make a strong and convenient table. With a scantling and a bit of wire lattice taken from a fence, they make an elastic mattress which, covered with straw and canvas, becomes a very comfortable bed.

The sailor is carpenter: the hatchet in his hand takes the place of the most ingenious tools of the joiner; painter: he has painted and refitted his boat from its tarry keel to the scroll work of the bulwarks and the figures and the beloved words they put on the stern; mender: he mends his sails and nets artistically; cook: during the long days at sea on his frail craft with its limited accommodations, he makes the most savory dishes from the fruits of his fishing and a few simple spices. His qualities and his knowledge are numerous and wide: astronomer and healer, and, as well, singer of beautiful songs which cradle his thought at the will of the rhythms, as the sea rocks his boat at the will of the waves.

But in this multiplicity of talents he lacks that of a driver, and what is more, a driver of a machine gun. That is a job which combines the heavy and the mountain artillery. A machine-gun driver should be able to drive in the saddle the leading team of horses and put the heavy caisson of ammunition through the most difficult evolutions. Again, he should be able to drive on foot the mule loaded with his pack-saddle and through the most impossible and sometimes the most dangerous paths.

We had scarcely begun to swallow a cup of thick, smoking, regulation coffee in a room of the cantonment, furnished with special skill, when Sub-Lieutenant Delpos — smart, carefree, smiling, a cap on the back of his head and a song on his lips — arrived.

Dedouche's description seemed to me to be exact. He was indeed a very young man, very quick, very blond and very gay. He was already an officer when others of his age had scarcely left college; he was already a hero counting in his active service a thousand feats of prowess when his rather sceptical contemporaries were content to read about them in books. Open merriment shone in his eyes. He had gained his promotion in the field far from the stifling atmosphere of study halls. Yesterday he was still a sergeant in Madagascar, Senegal, and Morocco; to-day he is an officer who has fought since the beginning of the Great War; to-morrow he will be a trainer of men. He knows them all; many are his old bedfellows or companions of the column. His remarks are keen and unrhetorical and they please the men. They love him and fear him; they are free with him and respect him. They know that he understands his trade perfectly and that they can deceive him in nothing.

Our introduction was short and unceremonious. A man brought on the table a bottle of very sweet Moselle wine, which is christened at the front "Champagne." It was one of those wines which make up for their qualities by such pompous appellations and well-intentioned labels as "Champagne de la Victory," "Champagne de la Revenge," "of the Allies," "of the Poilu," "of Glory." They are all equally bad, but they make a loud noise when the cork is drawn and most of the wine flows away in sparkling foam.

We drained our cups to the common health, and to the success and certain glory of the company.

Then the lieutenant, who has memories of the drama, said in a voice which recalled the tones of the already classic Carbon de Casteljaloux, his neighbor,

" Since my company has, I believe, reached its full number, shall we not show it to the *logis,* if you please?"

Under the rays of an anemic sun which had waited until the hour of sunset before it deigned to appear, we made a brief visit to the echelon.

First the roll; five corporal muleteers or drivers: Raynal, the owner of a vineyard in Gironde; Liniers, a salesman of wines and spirits and a great elector in the Twelfth Arrondissement; Glanais, Bonecase, Glorieu, carpenter, vine-grower, and farmer — and none of them had ever managed a horse in his life.

And the men — one in fifty is a cavalryman — but that one is perfect. He was trained at the cavalry school at Saumur; trained horses and bred them, so they at once turned him over to the echelon, where he had to lead a mule by the bridle. That, of course, was a reproach to his old trade, so in default of any other satisfaction it taught him the philosophy of resignation and peaceful blessedness.

The cavalry!

" Oh, the cavalry, that 's been posing five minutes," said Sub-Lieutenant Delpos — he was extremely fond of that expression.

There were horses and mules varying in age from five to seventeen. They were all sensible, settled down, their legs somewhat worn out, and more accustomed to the hearse than to a caisson, and more familiar with the song of the worker than with the roar of cannon. They were all gentle, only demanding oats and straw; some with their bones sticking out of their hides, while others were still sleek and shiny from their warm stables and fresh straw; all unconscious of what awaited them on the morrow.

One of the mules was a veteran, an enormous, cunning animal. His hair was short and rough, and in places there were great patches where the hide showed. His skin was hung on a projecting framework of bones, and, although he was well fed, he was very thin — with a thinness so unyielding to rations that it was impossible to get him fat. His head was that of an epicurean philosopher with deep mocking eyes. This was Chocolate.

Chocolate is beyond the time when he has an age. The oldest soldiers in the regiment have always known him, even at Marrakech and Rabbat in Morocco.

Chocolate has made many campaigns during his active service and he has received several wounds as well.

The story goes that one day in Morocco Chocolate got loose from the bivouac, and started browsing on the grass and wild oats in an ambuscade — between two fires. Absolutely indifferent to the crackling of bullets which he had known from infancy, he continued to lop off the plants until the pernicious bullets began to graze his skin. Then he stretched out at full length in a hollow in the sand and browsed on the grass within reach of his teeth, while he waited the end of the adventure. Then he went back to the bivouac in search of a pail of water and a bag of oats.

Now Chocolate is the file leader. He indicates by his example to the horses whom the pack-saddle galls that the best way of carrying it is to avoid romping to the right and the left, shifting about, and trotting, in fact, all movements which misplace the saddle or wrinkle the skin beneath. The secret is to work soberly, slowly and at an even pace.

Chocolate belongs to a family of mules which ranks high in history. The broad, rounded backs of his ancestors have borne debonnair sovereigns, preacher monks, magnificent Sultans and Sancho Panzas, baskets of vegetables and cans of milk. To-day Chocolate, their descendant, carries an infernal instrument — a machine gun. But what matters that to him? The road rolls on before him and he follows it. There are oats at the end, to-night or to-morrow, what difference does it make?

" He is cool," the drivers say. Coolness is the great secret of the Colonials.

Coolness, indifference to danger, bad weather, adversity, obstacles, death — no nervousness, no useless bursts of anger, no dangerous hurrying, no false starts. It is necessary to go — they will go — they arrive. That is all.

CHAPTER IV

THE SONG OF THE MACHINE GUN

DEDOUCHE brings me a note to sign for on the report book. It reads:

"The non-commissioned officers will assemble their sections in the courtyard of Cantonment No. 77 at 2.30. Each gun captain will present his gun. Service marching order, with masks and arms."

I sign mechanically to please Dedouche, who thinks he is showing me a special favor by offering me the first reading of all orders and reports. But this one interests me but little, for I have neither arms nor guns to present. So it is as a spectator that I am present at the lieutenant's inspection. This time I shall see the complete company.

I find myself at the appointed hour at Cantonment 77.

One must have lived in these remains of villages, which persist in standing, near the lines to have an exact idea of what they are. In these villages furious combats have taken place in the streets, from house to house, and for two years they have been occupied and overpopulated — a hamlet of one hundred and fifty inhabitants often serves as a cantonment for ten thousand men — by men of all arms of the service, from all regions, of all colors.

It is not ruin in all its tragic horror and majesty. It is worse.

It is something which appears to want to live, but which a latent leprosy eats away. Often there are traces of shells, the splatter of bullets, the marks of fire; the roofs may have fallen in from the recent shelling, but even yet the general effect is that the houses on the streets are still standing.

The fronts of these houses, made of straw and mud, with only a large door swinging on its hinges, are whole. Of course the mud has often been scratched in long, leprous wounds, and the straw tumbles out leaving the bare skeleton of worm-eaten wood; and, besides, the windows are without the glass, which has been broken to bits by the explosion of shells, and which is replaced by bits of paper or by calendars. But the real ruin is inside.

Here is the work of the carelessness and negligence of the wandering multitudes who pass that way, who arrive at evening, tired, muddy, wet, who fall asleep on damp straw, cut to pieces and crawling with vermin, and who go on the next day, or three days later, leaving as a mark of their passing a greater stench and a greater dilapidation.

The ruin is inside. It is not the beautiful ending of destruction by fire, but the slow death by cancer which eats away, by gangrene which mounts from the cattle sheds to the stable, from the stable to the barn, and from the barn to the hearth. And at last a day comes when the front alone is standing on the ruin of the annihilated house, and then men who are passing by, seeing that it is tottering and dangerous, cut it down with blows of the axe and chop the wood into bits for their little needs.

And so these houses die: houses which under their humble appearance had great souls palpitating with life, where lives were born and passed their years; where joys and griefs exclaimed and wept, where the peasant, the son of the soil, drew from this soil, the generatrix of strong races, the re-vivifying harvests which he stored away in the barn which to-day is dead.

Whole villages and great villages agonize in this way through months of wearing away, and their end is no less terrible, no less majestic, no less pitiful than of those villages with glorious names which the wrath of shells beats into dust.

Cantonment 77 is made up of those houses which waste away. Between the fragile walls, notched by an empty barn and a fallen shed, opens a courtyard. Filth spreads out in a vast pool on which float among the refuse a pile of garbage, boxes, the waste of cooking and greasy papers.

In the corner of a recess open to every wind, on piles of bricks held together by iron bars pulled from the window sills, the cook has set his pots and bowls in line. His fire of wood so green that the sap oozes out licks the already blackened walls with its long flames.

All that offers even a precarious shelter — a roof — is occupied by the men who crowd in there on old, filthy straw, and on the meager rations of fresh straw, often too fresh. And as the tiles and thatch let the rain filter through, they stretch above them strips of tent canvas.

Oh, blessed canvas! To what uses is it not put! It serves as a roof against bad weather, the rain and snow; a protection against dampness, mud and vermin; planted on two stakes, stretched to a door casing, it protects the fires for cooking from draughts; in the more comfortable cantonments in the rear, where the straw is clean and abundant, where the men are at last able to take off their shoes, and their muddy leggings and their trousers heavy with dampness, it serves as the bed clothes; and, finally, at the last hour it is in the tent canvas that they collect the bodies with their torn and shattered limbs. It serves as shroud and coffin. And, faithful to its rôle, it is the last shelter.

The men began to arrive by groups almost in order, at any rate as much so as the littered ground in the courtyard would permit. They assembled by sections in a half circle around the pool of filth. It was certainly a picturesque sight when, at the command "Attention," these men mounted a faultless guard around this fetid pool, where, among papers, tossed about and dirty, and box covers, there floated, bloated and fetid, all kinds of carrion, the rats of the last hecatomb.

Near the doorway on the largest and cleanest part of the courtyard the eight machine guns were drawn up in line.

Eight machine guns, the armament of the company.

Eight guns, so small, so fine, and such bits of workmanship, that one would think to see them that they were a child's playthings.

The machine guns appeared very coquettish and pretty as they rested on their bluish-gray tripod, with their steel barrels well burnished even to the mouth of their muzzles. They hardly appeared at all threatening with the polished leather of the breech, where the bronzed fist of the gun layer stood out in graceful designs, and the attenuated round and svelte circles of the radiator.

And the machine gun is a coquette, too. Under its appearance of delicacy and grace it conceals a terrible power of domination and strength. Yet it hurls pitiless death without noise, with a rapidity as furtive as a shout of laughter, with a tac-tac which is scarcely perceptible and which is no more

Remains of Villages near the Lines *See page 36*

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menacing than the familiar tac-tac of the sewing-machine or the typewriter.

And the machine gun is a coquette, too! Fashioned like a work of art, the brilliancy of its polished steel and the voluptuous roundness of the brass invite caresses. Its shots come from they know not where, since they can see nothing — a bush is sufficient to conceal it; light, it is here one minute and there another; it is not visible until one is almost upon it, yet its shots are fatal at some miles.

It is delicate and costly, needing a hundred things for its adornment, skilled care for its toilet and a hundred men to serve. Is not the machine gun a coquette?

As the Company Casanova is of recent formation it received an entirely new armament of the latest model. The guns are built on the Hotchkiss system — the last word of perfection in war. They are light, scarcely fifty pounds, and they are easy to manipulate skilfully. The rapidity of their fire is extreme, more than five hundred shots a minute, and their adjustment is such that they can fire on the most varied objects. First, there is blockade fire, which concentrates all the shots on a narrow point; then the sweeping fire, which sweeps the whole of an extended field; and finally, indirect fire, which hits its designated target with mathematical precision, at the same time concealing the source.

The machine gun is the little queen of battles. One may smile to look at her, but one shudders when he thinks of her ravages.

And the men are proud of their guns.

I observe them while the lieutenant speaks to them and their eyes look alternately at the lieutenant and at their respective guns. They know their gun; they love her; possess her. They have confidence in her, and it is she who defends them.

To-day there are about one hundred and fifty men grouped in the same specialty, from all regions, all regiments, all arms, who have come after more or less lengthy stays in the instruction camps at Nice, Clermont, and La Valbonne.

Their specialty has created among them a certain sort of affinity, a family characteristic. Machine gunners are an element apart, a sort of élite. In their ranks there is a certain homogeneity which comes from the practice of the same competency which is nearly a science. They feel somewhat superior to, at least different from, the ordinary companies.

They appreciate the worth of their distinction and scarcely ever associate with other troops. The companies of infantry are swamped in a battalion, while the companies of machine guns are isolated, autonomous, directly dependent on the commanding officer, and they enjoy an absolute initiative in a battle. Finally, they are not anonymous or numbered; they are not called the fifth, seventh, or the twelfth, but the " Company Casanova," as they once said Royal-Piémont or Prince Condé.

Then, too, there is their insignia. The insignia is the bauble, the jewel, of the soldier. It is a real satisfaction to have something on the uniform which distinguishes one from his neighbor. To such a point do they carry this that many cannot resist putting on insignia to which they have n't the slightest right. And none of the insignia arouses greater envy than the two small intersecting cannons of the machine guns.

It takes one hundred and fifty men, two officers, ten non-commissioned officers, and sixty horses to serve, supply and transport the eight small guns, one hundred and fifty men trained and inured to hardship. There is none here who has not been in several battles and received several wounds in his active service. There is none here who has not a good record. When said of one that means little, but when said of all it is worth telling.

There are artillerymen, cavalrymen, and sailors who have become foot soldiers through their different changes; and not only are all arms represented, but all professions, all classes and all temperaments. Jacquet, a poet and musician, a dreamer with an exquisite soul, is an accurate gun layer. Finger drives milk wagons in Paris, but with his gigantic hands he manipulates with delicacy the wheelwork of his Hotchkiss. Millazo, who behind his counter at Hanoï showed gracefully the jewels of Indo-Chinese art and learned at Lure the meticulous art of watchmaking, now manages a "sweeping" fire as calmly and accurately as he used to mount a spiral spring on its microscopic pivot. Corporal Vial, who used to verify accounts in the luxurious banks on the Riviera and handle tinkling gold and checks, here shows that he knows the science of fire and his machine and leads his squad with authority.

Charlet drove the heavy locomotives on the railways of the North; Gamie regulated the powerful looms in the textile factories, and they both owe to their knowledge of mechanics their duties as range takers. Imbert was a fisherman and, as he knows how to cook a savory bouillabaisse, he is assigned to the difficult rôle of cook and acquits himself conscientiously and well. However, Chevalier, an expert in geometry, who for twenty years grew pale in profound studies of logarithms and co-ordinates, here assumes the duties of mess corporal, and discusses with asperity the supplies and remarks pitilessly on the regulation cup of wine and the mathematical pounds and ounces of mutton, lard and beans.

In spite of what one might think, this odd collection of men is as homogeneous as could be imagined. This comes from the fact that above all this different knowledge is a uniform purpose, because all these multiple alliances tend toward a common end which is incarnated in their chief, a man from the South, who is expansive and impetuous, but who curbs his temperament under the rigid calm of a man from the North, one of the common people, a son of the soil, who has risen to the rank of officer, and a commanding officer at that, solely through persistency and courage.

When the lieutenant had finished his rapid but close inspection, and had examined with the eye of a connoisseur the condition and repair of the guns, he took in the whole company with a look, for it is his work which he commands with firmness and which he loves. He is already going, after addressing a few remarks to the adjutant and the classic, " All right. Break ranks," when a man steps out of the ranks and comes towards him.

" Lieutenant, the company is now completely equipped and armed, but there is, however, still something lacking."

" Indeed," replied the lieutenant, " and what 's that? "

" Its marching song."

" Its marching song! Have you chosen one? "

" Chosen one! Oh, no! We have an unpublished one, as new as the company itself, composed for us and created by us. Will you do us the honor of listening to it? "

"Will I? The devil. I ask it; I demand it. I want to learn it, too. Go on. Start it!" he exclaimed.

And then Gaix turned towards his comrades and began to sing in his great deep baritone voice our marching song, "Ma Mitrailleuse," which each section had learned secretly and which they sang together for the first time to-day.

On a rhythm taken from some war march, some one had composed simple words, which were nevertheless image-provoking and vibrant, where the alternating motet "Ma Mitrailleuse," sung in chorus, sounds like a bugle call.

This marching song is one of those which engrave themselves at once on the memory and in the heart, which are never forgotten, for in their accents are rooted the strongest impressions of the hours lived in the simple brotherhood of arms, the memory of dangers encountered together, the pride of victories, and the pious homage to those who sang it with us and whose manly voices were silenced forever in the night of battles.

And I find in writing it the same deep stirring emotion that I experienced when I first heard it.

MA MITRAILLEUSE

Sur notre front, dans ton abri,
Tu dors sur ton trépied bleu gris,
Calme dans l'ombre vaporeuse,
Ma mitrailleuse.
Et ton canon d'acier bleui
Benoîtement perce la nuit.
Que tu parais peu dangereuse,
Ma mitrailleuse.

Si parfois en te transportant
Je trouve ton poids fatigant,
Et dis tout bas " la sacré gueuse!"
Ma mitrailleuse,
Pardonne-moi, car j'ai grand tort,
Sachant que tu chantes la mort
De l'Allemagne furieuse,
Ma mitrailleuse.

Mais dans le petit jour blémi,
Alerte! Voici l'ennemi!
Et t'eveillant soudain rageuse,
Ma mitrailleuse,
Avec tes tac tac réguliers
Fauche les Boches par milliers,
Sans t'arrêter, noire et fumeuse,
Ma mitrailleuse.

Et comme nous elle attendra
Le grand jour qui déclanchera
L'offensive victorieuse,
Ma mitrailleuse.

Poursuivant le bandit germain,
J'entendrai sur les bords du Rhin,
Au grand soleil, claquer joyeuse
Ma mitrailleuse.

When the last accents, sung by the men at the top of their lungs, died away, there was silence and I looked at the lieutenant.

He was seated on a staircase, with his head leaning on his clenched fists. He had listened to the whole song, and now he remained for a moment as if waiting. And when he stood up his eyes were slightly red and his lips concealed under a smile the impress of intense emotion.

"It is good," he said, "very beautiful, my friends, and I congratulate you all. Your song is admirable, it will go with us everywhere, and we will lead it to victory. But who is the author? There must be an author. The devil, there must be an author!"

There was a moment of silence as if each one hesitated to reply, but a big sergeant cried out in a stentorian voice:

"A *ban* for the author, Lieutenant Delpos, and a couplet for him besides."

Then the men broke all alignment, pressed around their young sub-lieutenant, joyous, proud and blushing with pleasure, weeping with joy, and burst out at the top of their lungs, with indescribable feeling, which showed all their strength, their will for victory and their unbreakable confidence:

Et comme nous elle attendra
Le grand jour qui déclanchera
L'offensive victorieuse,
Ma mitrailleuse.
Poursivant le bandit germain,
J'entendrai sur les bords du Rhin,
Au grand soleil, claquer joyeuse
Ma mitrailleuse.

Then, amidst the applause and the "vivats," the lieutenant embraced his young friend vigorously and said:

"Nom de Dieu! You did n't tell me that you were a poet. I congratulate you."

And taking him by the arm, he went off joyous, skipping like a gamin, taking up again the inspiring refrain:

Ma Mitrailleuse . . . Ma Mitrailleuse!

CHAPTER V

A RECONNAISSANCE IN THE FOG

ONE evening the lieutenant said to me a little after dinner:

"To-morrow, at four o'clock, we 're going to the first line trenches to find positions for the machine guns. The section leaders are coming, and if you want to come, you 'll find it interesting."

The selection of a machine gun emplacement is essentially a delicate task. The Germans are past masters in this art. So, in the days of attack when our artillery had made a thorough preparation and they were convinced that there was nothing left in front and we could advance without trouble, exactly as though taking a walk in a square, we found ourselves abruptly right in the fire of a Boche machine gun which had not been spotted and which was so skilfully camouflaged that it had resisted the most terrible bombardment.

It is necessary above all to find a place which commands a wide field of fire and one easy to play on. It must also be easy to conceal the gun in some way, for, if it is once spotted, a shell will soon send the gun and its crew pirouetting in the air, unless they are forewarned by a shot too long or too short, but whose destination is unmistakable, and so have time to move.

It was scarcely daylight when we assembled in front of the lieutenant's quarters.

A fog that could be cut with a knife limited our view to a few yards. It was cold.

Sergeant Lace is there already walking back and forth in the fog. He is always exactly punctual, anyway. He is equipped as if for an assault with his revolver, mask, and field glasses. His chest is covered with numerous colonial decorations, his military medal and his war cross with three palms.

Lace is a section leader *emeritus*. He is rough and harsh in appearance; he never smiles, or rarely; he is tanned from his long stay in the colonies, but he does his duty with unfailing exactness. During an attack in Champagne he found himself under the command of his brother, a lieutenant, who was mortally wounded at his side. He embraced him reverently, took the papers, pocketbook and letters from the pockets of his jacket, removed his decorations, which were now relics, and resumed his place in the ranks. He fought all day, attacked a fortified position, assisted in the dangerous task of clearing a wood, and when night came, by the light of star shells under a hellish bombardment and a storm of shrapnel, he went back and brought out his brother's body and gave it proper burial. Lace is a soldier and a conscientious one.

Other silhouettes approach and come out of the darkness like ghosts. One is Poirier, a very young man, who laughs in the midst of the worst dangers, which he absolutely ignores. Then there is big Roullé, whom ten years in the tropics did not succeed in making thin, and whose breadth of shoulder is ill-adapted to the narrowness of the communication trenches. Then Pierron comes on the run, singing a Neapolitan song. He is from Saigon and is homesick for the Asiatic nights, whose charms he is forever describing.

As the hour strikes the lieutenant appears.

We follow the main road through the fog. This leads to Lehons, a ruined village which is situated in the lines and cuts the trenches.

One can hardly distinguish the trees in the fields either to the right or the left. The dawn is silent. Nature wants light for her awakening, but this morning the lights persist in staying dim.

We hear occasionally a cannon shot, as sharp as the crack of a whip. It comes from a battery of "75's" concealed in a wood at our side, which fires at stated intervals for tactical reasons. The shell shatters the air over our heads and all becomes quiet again.

So we walk along for nearly an hour, some grouped together while others dream away by themselves. The fog now begins to lighten and we are able to see the adjoining fields. They are torn with shell holes, the rare trees are shattered and slashed, and their branches hang down like broken limbs. In the ditches, full of muddy water, are piles of material — rolls of barbed wire, eaten by rust, chevaux de frise broken to pieces, and crossbars and round logs already covered with moss.

Suddenly, there in front of us, at two paces, splitting the fog is — the village. There are houses — remains of houses — and parts of walls which through some prodigious feat of balance persist in remaining upright.

The first house on the right was apparently of some importance. The two master walls still remain in spite of the roof having fallen. Between them is a pile of stones, burnt girders, and in the middle of the heap of rubbish still stands, intact and rigid, pointing straight toward yawning heaven, the iron balustrade of a winding staircase. A great signboard of black wood runs from one wall to the other, apparently holding them together, and one might believe that they only remain upright, thanks to it. It is riddled with bullets and the flames have licked it as they passed, but one can still read the long yellow letters of the inscription:

Lodgings

Famous Cuisine *Comfortable Rooms*

None of us risk an ironical reflection or a mocking smile, for to-day we have become accustomed to so many strange inscriptions which in disaster are the living lie of their emptiness.

Opposite, on the other side of the road, the military cemetery shows its multitude of crosses.

Their number has exceeded the capacity of the site provided for it, and they have already become masters of the surrounding fields. These graves are all immutably alike, and they are built and maintained with a fraternal affection by companies of Territorials who hold the cantonments in the neighborhood.

Yes, they are all immutably alike. There is always the white wooden cross with the name of the deceased, the number of his regiment, his company and the date of his death in simple black letters. The grave is a small square, bordered by bits of tile or bricks, sometimes by planks or the bottoms of bottles. And on this humble burial place someone has planted primroses.

A bottle stuck in the ground by the neck holds a bit of paper on which is written all supplementary information as to identity which will guide the pious pilgrim of to-morrow.

Sometimes a perforated helmet or a tattered cap placed on the cross by a comrade who respects his memory tells us that the soldier was wounded in the head. One shudders at some of these helmets, they are rent so grievously.

We pass rapidly but religiously through the narrow paths between the graves. It is a sort of duty rather than curiosity which leads us to look over all these cemeteries in search of some known name, a friend's name, so that we may pay our last respects.

But time passes. It would not be prudent to stop longer, for already above the neighboring hedge we can hear the sinister "ta-co" of the German bullets. Branches of an apple tree, lopped off by the shells, fall at our feet.

So we enter the village through what was once a street. Here for fifty yards are barricades of bricks and dirt interlaced with farm instruments and carts.

Barbed-wire entanglements which only leave a narrow, difficult, zigzag passage between them are evidences of the bitter fights which took place here.

We reach the church which is the beginning of the communication trench which leads to the front lines.

The church! There is absolutely nothing left of it. One might think that the savagery of the

German cannon raged with a special hate on the buildings created for rest, meditation and prayer.

The church has fallen down and the naves are now only a mass of stones on which the briers are already beginning to grow. A sort of arched door still stands at the entrance, without a scratch. It is nearly new and its brilliant ironwork seems a challenge in the midst of this destruction.

The communication trench starts on the spot where the high altar used to stand. We follow it under the ruins, through the orchards which it furrows, adjusting our steps to each other, and keeping our eyes on the man ahead.

Above our heads nature awakes; the sky appears clear now; and branches of trees with their buds and blossoms hang over the parapets.

It is five o'clock and broad daylight when we reach the proposed emplacement. It is on a knoll in the middle of an orchard which is bordered some hundred yards away by hawthorn and privet hedges. Behind the hedges are the Boche lines.

The engineer in charge of laying out the works is on the ground. He tries to profit by the only salient which permits firing on a sufficiently wide sweep of ground. On the right it commands the entrance to the village by a road. We see its white windings where it unrolls through the gardens, and then it plunges into a small wood and loses itself. Opposite us the emplacement commands an entire sector.

They will scoop out the place underneath, and they will keep the green shell of grass and bushes which make the most fortunate and natural sort of camouflage. A communication trench grafted on the main trench from the church will give access to it.

Orders are given rapidly, measurements are taken, and the tasks laid out. It is hardly expedient for us to delay in this corner, for our movements would betray our intentions, and already bullets, which are by no means spent bullets, cross above our heads singing their unappreciated buzz.

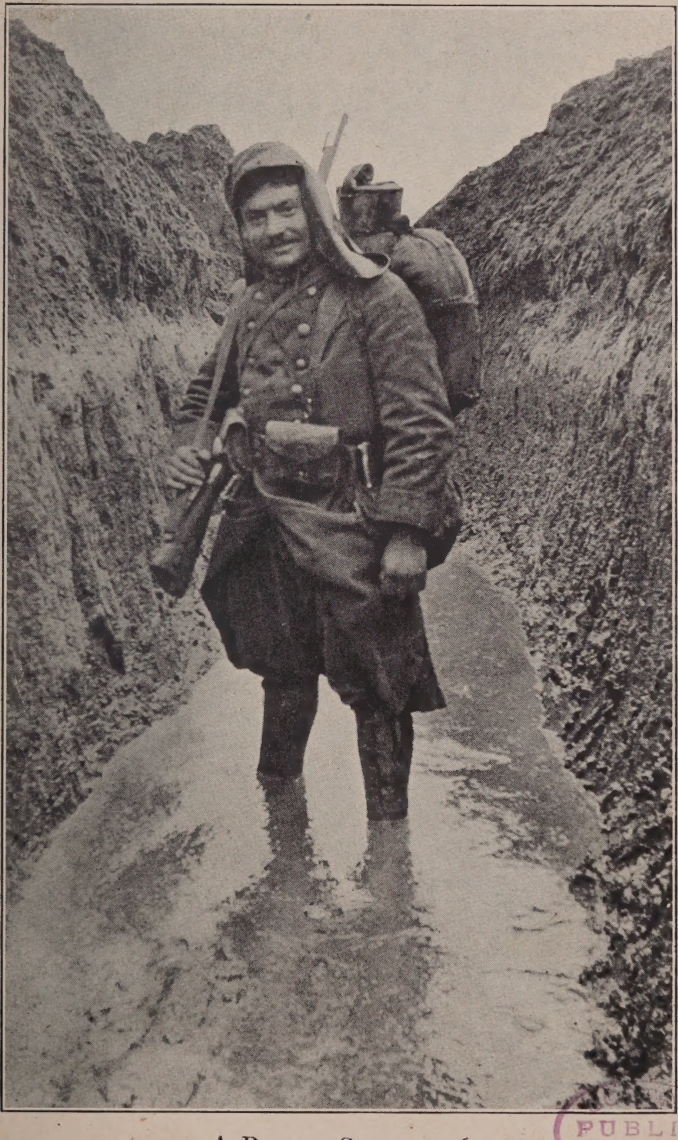
We make our way back through the trench.

In the village the men belonging to the supporting columns have left their lairs and are attending to their usual occupations. Some of them are washing their clothes in the watering-trough in the square and singing as they wash. The company barber is installed near the fountain and the men form a circle about him as they wait their turn. On a butcher's stall of white stone a cook is cutting up a quarter of beef into equal rations. Only two hundred yards from the enemy the village has taken up almost its usual existence again. These men are not afraid. At the sound of the first shell they jump into their cellars, which are amply protected by earth and boards. But they already have their customs. Shells only come at the hour when the supplies are brought up, and not always then, for the shelling does n't occur regularly every day. The enemy does n't waste munitions on a village he knows is so well destroyed.

The fresh air and the long road have set our teeth on edge and given us an appetite. We halt to break a crust. Some have brought canteens of wine or coffee; bottles of preserves appear, and the improvident — I am one — pay homage to those who pass a full flask.

The sun is already high when we start back along the road.

The lieutenant loves a quick pace and a marching song. So at the top of his lungs he begins one of his lively songs full of expressions that



A Poilu *See page 56*

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would have startled a growler of the Empire through their shamelessness, but which do not disturb the modesty of a Colonial at all, supposing that a Colonial ever had any.

And the section leaders take up the refrain in chorus.

Some steps behind, Sub-Lieutenant Delpos stops to light his fine Egyptian cigarette. In spite of the early hour and the uncertain weather, and with no thought of the disagreeable march through the sticky mud of the communication trench, he is dressed with the greatest care. His bright tan leggings are elegantly curved; his furred gloves are of the finest quality, and the pocket of his jacket, cut in the latest English style, shows a fine cambric handkerchief, subtly scented. And arm in arm we follow the quick pace of our comrades, while he continues the interrupted story of his latest exploit.

"Yes, *mon cher,* picture to yourself an exquisite blonde. I met her on the Rue des Saints-Pères. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

OUR FIRST ENGAGEMENT

YESTERDAY evening at five o'clock we received an order to take our positions in the front line to support the attack which the second battalion would make at nine-thirty.

It was raining. It has rained all the time for some months, and we have become accustomed to the mud and dampness.

We left the cantonment at Morcourt at nightfall. We went along the towpath of the canal, across the bridge at Froissy, through the ruins of Éclusier and entered the communication trench which we knew as the " 120 long."

The silent march is accomplished with little difficulty. There is no sound of cannon. Everything is quiet. We reach our positions about midnight — four dugouts camouflaged for the guns of two sections which are to play on the sector; the two other sections remain in the " Servian " trench in reserve at the disposal of the commander.

The lieutenant examines the post established for him. Farther ahead is a communication trench which has been completely overturned and destroyed, now nothing but a great hole. Below is a big tangle of barbed wire, fascines and ripped open sandbags. We can see very well through this jumble and we are installed there.

We can make out the details of the Boche lines through the glass.

"Come. I think it will be all right. But it will be hard. Fortunately, it can't last long."

Then we return to the positions for a final inspection.

The emplacements which our guns occupy are round excavations about three yards across and two deep. In the middle nearly on a level with the surrounding ground is a sort of pedestal for the machine gun. The barrel scarcely reaches beyond the hole and it is absolutely invisible at a short distance. The men have proceeded to make a camouflage which resembles the character of the terrain with wickerwork covered by dirt and grass. The many inventions with which they have increased the weight of the machine guns — the shield, sights and periscope — are in their places. The men disdain these additions a little and even neglect to use them unless forced to do so.

" They would only have to add a little more," they say, " to make a ' 75 ' instead of a machine gun."

" The periscope may be of use for something. You have to try half an hour before you can see anything. I like my eyes better."

The ammunition wagons are installed and opened; the belts are ready; the gun layer, the loader, and the crew are at their stations.

The lieutenant makes the rounds of each section, inspecting the guns, testing the mechanism, trying the weight of the munitions, taking account of everything and looking each man in the face.

" We are the last company organized," he says. " You know that the machine gunners should be the flower of the army; don't forget it. It is our first engagement. Try to show that we 're there a little."

This short unpretentious harangue produces its effect on the men, who smile as they listen to it. They are not nervous now, but only slightly curious. They are not sorry to put their toys to the test at last, and to shoot their projectiles at something besides the moving figures in the training camps.

When the inspection is over and the final instructions have been given, we return to the commandant's station, and stretch out to sleep on the reserve caissons which protect us from the mud. Rifts in the clouds reveal the stars. It will be fine to-morrow. But waiting is cold, very cold, and it is impossible to sleep under such a wind. We talk.

"You 're going to hear a concert. They have n't massed more than three hundred guns in all, from the '75' to the heavy artillery, on our fifteen hundred yard front for nothing. Have you seen the '150' mortars? They have some muzzles."

Dawn appears. A light fog rises from the ground and seems thickest at the side of the canal where the German positions are. It is the coldest hour of the day and the earth of our dugout is as hard as iron; it is frozen. Instinctively I let down the ear-flaps of my cap which until now I have kept under my helmet.

"Are you cold?"

" I 'm not warm."

" A drop of brandy? "

" Sure."

The lieutenant passes his canteen to me and as I drink the thin stream from its mouth I feel a wave of warmth.

Light comes, but it is very pale. Around us we hear the tread of feet on the hard ground and the slapping of arms across the chest.

We wait nervously. Presently we receive an order not to fire until the blast of the whistle.

Eight o'clock! Behind us, in the limpid azure, the red disk of the sun rises.

A shell cuts through the air; then another; then still another. Our artillery is firing on the Boche lines.

" Attention." The response is instantaneous. We can still see no movement in the ranks of the infantry to our right whose rush we are to support. What are they waiting for? The men are nervous and they start to grumble.

Boom! comes the Boche's reply.

A great mass of earth, grass and crumbled stones shoots up a hundred yards ahead of us!

Too short!

Boom! still another. Still short!

A large shell heads for us. It thunders. Where is it going to burst? The devil! It falls near our first section, to the left; then, almost at once, another, a little to the right. Are we spotted? We have n't fired a cartridge yet, and there is n't an aeroplane or sausage in the air.

Two "150's," one right after the other, burst fair on the section, right in the hole. An enormous mass of earth spurts up. Through the dust and smoke we see broken arms, sandbags ripped open, legs torn from the body, an entire body, the gun! . . .

The lieutenant knits his brows in dismay. A sergeant from the reserve half section, slightly pale, runs up with the details.

"Sergeant Rollé, the gun layer, and the crew are killed."

"Occupy the emplacement with your half-section."

"Very well, Lieutenant."

Shells are falling in our sector without a break. All the guns are splattered with splinters and most of the crews are slightly wounded.

Durozier's half section jump out of their dugout in a hurry and throw themselves into the hole which has now increased in size to a vast yawning crater.

" If we could only fire on something. But there 's nothing to see. And no signal."

The Boche artillery certainly has a grudge against our first section. The new gun is scarcely in position when a great shell falls in the same place, in the same crater.

We see distinctly a body blown high into the air, and the body still holds the mount of the machine gun which he was just setting in place. Headless, disemboweled, it falls just in front of our dugout within reach of our hands. It is Gouzé, the chief gunner.

" The *salauds!* "

An intelligence officer from the major reaches us.

" Get ready to support the wave which is going over with all your guns ! "

The shells burst on our position implacably. There is n't the slightest choice between the emplacements. Three guns are still intact and ready to fire at the blast of the whistle. But the fourth gun must be put in position, too.

"Tell the adjutant of the section to occupy the crater," comes the order.

By means of the half-destroyed communication trench I reach the section which I find burrowing in shelters built hastily out of whatever came handiest and deliver my order.

The adjutant takes it and turns pale.

"All right, but there 's no great chance of our getting there."

Their hearts throb, and they look at each other. It is true that it is necessary, but on the parapet between the trench and the crater, no longer the slightest protection, shells fall like hail and without a let-up. They hesitate.

As if he had foreseen this, the lieutenant had followed behind me. He reads their hesitation in their faces and is about to say something to overcome it when the blast of the major's whistle sounds. It is the signal. The wave jumps from the parallels and dashes forward. We must fire.

Our three guns have already begun their rattle and are spraying the terrain before the enemy's trenches close to the ground, probing the loopholes, mowing the parapets, and cutting the last of the barbed wire.

The fourth gun ought to fire too; it must. Then, quietly, with that unusual coolness which characterizes him, the lieutenant clambers over the parapet.

" Will you come with me, *Margis?* "

Cigarette between his lips, leaning carelessly on his curved handled cane, as though he were going for a morning walk through the fields, he advances, standing very straight, without hurrying, and without losing an inch of his great height.

The men understand. Five seconds later we are in the crater and in less time than it takes to tell it the gun begins to fire like the rest.

The enemy's artillery has now changed its objective. It now aims its fire on the assaulting wave.

We return to our shelter. The spectacle is wonderful. Almost without losses, our waves reach the first of the enemy's lines and clear them at a bound.

" Lengthen the fire. . . . On the second position. . . . Farther . . . on the third; on the fortified emplacement; to the left of the woods. . . . Fire, fire, fire, nom de Dieu! "

The fire on our sector begins again more violently than ever. We have bothered the enemy and he wants to silence us.

Three out of four of our guns are silent. The fourth, the last one to arrive, with all the rapidity of its fire, alone sustains the attack of our infantry. The wonderful little machine devours without a skip the endless munitions which the crew have difficulty in bringing to it.

" Fire, Adjutant, fire! Don't stop. Give it to them," shouts the lieutenant, seized by the fever of battle.

And the adjutant fires, fires without stopping. Our wave reaches its objective, the enemy flees, whole companies surrender.

" That 's it; we are there. Fire on the reserves, farther, the length of the embankment. Cease firing, stop it, stop firing. We are there. . . . Cease firing! "

Just as he shouts this order a shell, the last one — the third on the same spot — falls, bursts, and buries the gun and its heroic crew.

" M . . .! The swine! Can't they see that it is finished? "

Heavily and mournfully we make toll of the dead. Comrades pay their last respects to their comrades. They take their letters and keepsakes, and arrange the bodies for their last resting place as best they can.

The order to go back is given.

For two hours we make our way through the communication trench, now only a stream of mud in which we sink to our ankles.

We advance, dejected, silent, heavy with fatigue, depressed by the thought of those we have left behind, whom we shall never see again, as was our wont, even yesterday at the cantonment.

The lieutenant is in the lead, leaning on his baton, silently, chewing on his eternal cigarette.

We finally reach the end of the trench at Froissy and come out on the main road.

In spite of their long hours of fatigue and the sleepless nights, the men suddenly seem less weary.

They no longer march one on top of the other, stepping over corpses. Their horizon has broadened; they see; they breathe; they come out of their trance; they emerge from Hell, they come from death. They are coming back to life!

Two hundred yards ahead we can already see groups: our mules, our limbers, companies of Territorials who are repairing the roads, sappers from the engineer corps, men from the field kitchens, automobiles, dreams . . . the living world at last.

The sub-lieutenant has remained at the rear of the column, assuming the difficult task of encouraging the stragglers and keeping up the spirits of the weak. Now he runs up and down the ranks. He is proud of his men; he loves their swagger and steadiness.

"Come, children, a little speed. Try to march by these people in some style."

And as we approach the first huts he begins to sing at the top of his lungs his song, the song of the machine gun:

Mais dans le petit jour blémi,
Alerte! Voici l'ennemi!
Et t'eveillant soudain rageuse,
  Ma mitrailleuse,
Avec tes tac tac reguliers,
Sans t'arrêter, noire et fumeuse,
  Ma mitrailleuse.

Some of the men look at him in surprise, look at him and then begin to sing.

And this bruised troop, which had just lost half its effective strength, with its wounded men with their bloody bandages, their torn clothes, their arms in bits, filed by singing this heroic joyful song, expressing in their voices all their hopes and all their triumphs.

It defiled between lines of astonished men who stood respectful, stupefied at so much energy, so much fire and dash in the face of so much death.

In position before his staff, fingers together in the prescribed position of salute, a general stood with bared head, while the company marched by.

CHAPTER VII

EASTER EGGS

EASTER — it fell on April twenty-third that year — dawned splendidly, a real day of gladsome spring.

The company was off duty. We had worked for a month on the fortifications in the front-line trenches and we deserved this fine day.

In addition the sector was quiet. There had n't been an engagement or a skirmish since February. This large village — more than a village, a town almost — scarcely five miles from the Boche lines, absolutely unprotected, not concealed in the slightest by a bend in the terrain, by a hill or a wood, had not received a single shell in three months.

Of course it is true that the church, town hall and some factories were injured, but not very much. They had some large shell holes, but they had n't fallen in or tumbled down. The church and town hall still had their roofs, and if the chimneys of the sugar refineries were cut on the bias, it was high up, almost at the top, as if they wanted to blunt them, or spare them, or preserve them.

We were now accustomed to this incomprehensible calm, in fact the officers were often heard to say,

" This quiet bodes no good to us."

All day and nearly all night, too, we hear the shriek of French and Boche shells in the air. Batteries of heavy artillery search for their marks, but all that misses us and passes over our heads or strikes in front. We know that they are n't aimed at us, and we take no interest in them. So with that fine carelessness of men long since accustomed to the worst dangers, we live in absolute security.

That Easter morning a musical mass was sung in an immense great hall which had been used formerly for entertainments. A crowd of soldiers of every branch of the service and from all the regiments encamped in the neighborhood packed the place. In the crowd was a goodly number of civilians, including women and girls who were wearing their best dresses for the first time in a year.

The band of the . . . first Territorials played.

Someone beside me dared to murmur,

"All the same, if a Boche shell fell in that crowd, what a mess it would be!"

"Don't think," came from several sides at once, "about Boche shells. They fire them. They know we are here. They are afraid —"

The chaplain, assisted by two clerical stretcher bearers, began worship on the improvised altar on the stage.

Soldiers sang the psalms of the liturgy.

I was nervous, and sobs came to my throat. In order not to make a ridiculous spectacle of myself with my tears I went out. I ran to the cantonment, saddled my horse, and we galloped at random through the sunny country on paths covered with flowers. I stopped in the depths of a valley under the poplars and stretched out on the grass. My horse laid down beside me. And while he munched the grass entirely indifferent to me, I said:

"Kiki, old Kiki, if an unexpected shell fell on us now and blotted us out, that would be much less disastrous than if it fell among those who at this hour are praying in that chapel. They are praying for their far-away firesides, their mothers, their wives.

" They are praying for the preservation of the past and for the future. They have the joy of believing, and that belief, that faith, has steeped them in a special life to which they remain attached.

" But we, old horse? If a shell annihilates us, what of it?

" We have never believed anything and we never will.

" I have impressed my brutal scepticism on the beings who are nearest and dearest to me. I have torn down the faith of their cradles . . . a faith in the Beyond.

" So when we shall be under the sod sleeping our long night, before next spring has awakened its green verdure on our remains, base and nameless oblivion will already have overtaken us. On the simple white cross my hastily traced name will not even be read. . . .

" Perhaps in passing near my abandoned grave someone will say, ' Poor fellow! ' Perhaps someone more sentimental than the rest will throw flowers on it.

" But in disappearing, old horse, we shall harm no one.

" The tears on the beautiful eyes I know so well will at first be bitter, but they will be dried at last."

This rather melancholy monologue was not to Kiki's taste at all. He interrupted me by whinnying loudly. He knew it was time for oats.

So we went back to the cantonment under the fine midday sun. Before our door at the last house on the left, on the road to the sugar refinery, Burette, the quartermaster-sergeant, was going through his matutinal ablutions. He generally began them about eleven, just as they were calling dinner, which made him twenty minutes late and gave him a chance to growl about the cooking, which was not hot enough to suit him, or about his share, which, according to his appetite, was reduced to a proper allowance.

Inside, seated before an open canteen which served him equally as a seat or a writing desk, was Adjutant Dotan reading and re-reading and sighing over the letters he took from a voluminous package in front of him. In a loud voice he mused over the problem which haunted his days and nights:

"Shall I marry? Or, shall I not?"

For two years now Dotan had seen the realization of his matrimonial projects grow further and further away from week to week, from month to month.

On the first leave the Regimental Administrative Council had not acted on his request. Then, for two consecutive times, leave was stopped on the day before he was going to go. And despite the advice of the colonel, to whom he told his grievance, Dotan would not marry by proxy. This ceremony *in partibus,* entrusted to a third party, seemed to him the least bit ridiculous, and he had a well-developed desire for the whole of the wedding ceremonies.

"Shall I marry? Or, shall I not?"

While he thought over his dilemma, he read for the hundredth time the letters from his gentle fiancée, who awaited him in Provence. And he occupied the monotony of the long hours in writing her two letters a day, one in the morning and another in the evening, with sometimes a supplementary postal card in addition.

" To think that if I were married I should have already been so happy! "

" Three days," Morin let fall cynically in his innocent voice.

" Yes, I should have been happy."

" Three days," insisted Morin, " the second day before, the day before, and the day of your wedding until noon. And then you would n't be as you are now — free, tranquil, and without a care."

" Free, tranquil, without a care! Oh, yes, you say. You 're always the same. Free, tranquil and happy! You must have learned that by looking out of your window, you, say . . ."

Morin, in accordance with his parsimonious use of words, did not want to carry on this tedious discussion. He would have answered, nevertheless, had not Dedouche announced that the table was set, and that there was a wonderful menu, a real Easter menu.

Chevalier, the mess corporal, both our Vatel and cup bearer, had come back from leave the day before. Before our ravished eyes he untied his packages, spread out sumptuous, epicurean dainties, and drew from their thick straw covers generous bottles of wine whose very appearance made us joyful.

Morin had been a constant guest at the select restaurants of La Cannebière and at the famous inns of La Corniche, and is an expert in the art of opening a fine wine without shaking it, and he also knows how to carve roasts and chickens skilfully and symmetrically.

He was opening with suitable impressiveness an old bottle of Sauterne, whose bright golden color brought smiles to our faces, when a tremendous explosion brought us to our feet and threw down the single partition in the room.

"The gun back in the garden draws the fire," mumbled Dedouche with his mouth full, and without letting go of his plate which he was rubbing carefully with a large bit of bread.

But as he spoke a still more violent explosion shattered all the window panes in the house to bits.

A great Boche shell had fallen thirty yards from us in the street which had been recently covered with hard flint and which it scattered into innumerable fragments. We heard the cries of the wounded and the dying outside.

"Quick! Into the cellar!"

But none of us lost our heads sufficiently to take refuge in the cellar without our munitions.

One brought the fowl, another the bottles, a third the sauce, and someone the cheese and candles, and under the threat of shots which speeded us we reached our underground shelter.

The light of two candles stuck in bottles showed us the table in the darkness and we spread out our dinner things anew.

Above was the bombardment in all its intensity.

Shots landed in the road level with our air-hole, which, as a provision against such an occurrence, had long since been stuffed with sand-bags.

We heard things falling!

"*Mince!* what are they offering us for Easter eggs?"

This ready joke made us laugh, and we forgot the tragedy of the hour. In the heady anesthesia of real Pommard, and not christened "Pommard" for use at the front, but which had a real Burgundian bouquet, we forgot that the shells were raging in all their fury above us.

The shadow of a man appeared at the entrance to the cellar. Illuminated by the wavering yellow lights of our candles, it stood out in sharp contrast in the darkness of the staircase.

" Is the margis here? . . . Margis, the lieutenant says you are to bring all the horses at once to the gulley in the Caix woods and shelter them from the bombardment."

" All right, I 'm coming. Go on, Dedouche, pour out another glass of Pommard. I 'll take my dessert in my pocket."

I picked up my helmet, mask and cane and was ready to go, as I listened through the vaults and hoped for a let-up in the storm.

" It 's over. We can go."

" When you wish, old fellow. They 've stopped for breath."

" You 'll find out in five minutes."

" Bah! I 've more time to go than I need."

" Good luck, and if you find any Easter eggs on the way bring them back for dinner."

The adjutant's reiterated joke no longer had the same zest for me and it hardly made me smile.

Outside, the streets were empty, and there was n't a soul in sight.

The bombardment had stopped, but no one was taken in by this deceptive calm. From one moment to another we waited for a new bombardment even more violent than the first. The Boches are creatures of habit and this is not the first time they 've played this trick. When they bombard a cantonment, they very often interrupt their bombardment some minutes so as to make us think it is over; then, when the men have ventured into the streets, they suddenly begin again and make fresh victims.

A house has fallen in the middle of the road some steps from our cantonment. Débris block the way, and we have to climb over them. Farther along, at the other end of the street, a house which was still intact this morning is now in flames.

There is no time to lose. Already several shells, advance messengers of the coming storm, begin to fall. I was about to dart across the Place when a " 105 " fell on the pavements and burst.

A poor little soldier carrying two enormous bags, a great bundle of linen, and some souvenirs in his hands passed just then. He was on his way to the station at Guillaucourt to take the train, for he was going on leave.

Rejoicing in his approaching happiness he walked on without paying the slightest attention to this atmosphere where death was hovering. A shot hit him in the back and passed out the other side. I jumped to aid him. He was bathed in blood. In a gentle, caressing, almost timid voice he said to me:

"Oh, it's not painful. I am dying."

And then with his lips, with an expression of kindness and thankfulness which I shall never forget, he murmured, "Yvonne." . . . And his face haloed with blessedness like the religious images of the martyrs, he died.

I stood there in ecstasy, transfixed, before that beauty in death, before that strength of love which lights the final hour.

How many I have seen die in this way! In their last breaths all had the name of some woman, and their eyes lighted at the name.

In the final moment of a life which is going out physical suffering no longer counts. The name of the loved one embodies all the vanishing mirage of the future, the end of a too beautiful dream, the memories of a happy past . . . of a happy past, for the bad times are forgotten.

Before the quivering body of this poor little soldier, struck down fiercely just as he was going on leave, full of hope, of plans, of dreams, a song on his lips, I forgot the threatening shells. An artilleryman went by on the run and shouted at me:

"Get out of that. You 'll get done up." And I fled.

Our horses were bivouacked in the courtyard of a sawmill. Not an accident there. I counted them all at a glance.

The underground shelter of the men was in the back of the yard, and I went to the air-hole which was stopped up by a piece of sheet-iron which served as a screen against splinters.

"Oh, down there! Men of the echelon. All outside. To horse. We must hurry. Come on, hurry up! Your masks, helmets, forward with just the bridle!"

One by one they jumped out of their lairs, grimacing as the bright sun struck them full in the face as they came out of the darkness.

"Each one two horses, by squads of six. . . . One hundred yards between each squad. The other men will remain here and mobilize the pack saddles and caissons in the cellar. Take the road to the Caix station . . . . on the road lined with poplars . . . . On the gallop . . . . no straggling."

Some minutes later we were already going out of the village. It was a bad passage, but the only one and the shortest one to reach our destination, but three hundred yards had to be covered on entirely unprotected ground opposite the Boches.

Boom! It was the expected. The shells began to fall again. A cloud tinted with red from the tiles of a falling house rises in the air and makes a large spot in the sky back by the church.

Boom! There 's another one now and nearer to us, near the sugar refinery.

A crash, an avalanche of bricks; this time it is the chimney of the sawmill which falls on the horses' cantonment. It was time, five minutes sooner and we would have been under it.

"Go on, go on. . . . Gallop, for God's sake. Corporals . . . keep the distances. . . . Spread out the squads. . . . Get into the fields . . . behind the trees."

We reach the deep path like a whirlwind, while the bombardment rages over the village more than ever.

"Any accident? Anyone hit? Good. Assemble, and on the trot now."

Ten minutes later we are in the shelter of Muguet wood, completely shut off from the view of the Boche artillery.

The wood deserves its name, for it scents the air a hundred yards about with the perfume of violets and lilies of the valley, which form a carpet between the trees and which our mules, entirely insensible to the subtle beauties of nature, begin to eat as though they were common fodder.

"Corporals . . . look to your sections. . . . Is everyone here? . . . All the horses too?"

I cast a rapid glance over the parked beasts.

"Look, Liniers, where is Chocolate?"

And indeed where was Chocolate?

How did it happen that Chocolate wasn't there?

Still he had been with the rest at the sawmill.

Chocolate, as the veteran of the echelon, received special consideration from the men. As far as the dispositions of the cantonment permitted, they reserved for him a covered shelter, a feeding rack, and a manger.

This time the sawmill offered many resources. The stable walls still stood with only a few gaps, and the roof was still intact. Beside some artillery horses, who were generally absent, there was an available place and they had given it to Chocolate. And there the drivers had forgotten him.

If it had been any other animal we would have let him go, but Chocolate was an entirely different matter and we must go and find him.

" Raynal, I hand over the command of the detachment to you. Liniers, come with me, we 'll go and find Chocolate."

We went back over the path, on foot this time, but as fast as our legs would go. As we reached the village the intensity of the bombardment seemed to decrease. Were we going to be lucky enough to strike another lull? Again there were particularly violent explosions, nearer, then nothing more.

We reached the village entirely out of breath.

As we turned into the street which led to the sawmill Liniers stopped suddenly, as if petrified, and began to wave his hands.

"M . . .!"

"What?"

"The shed. . . ."

"Well, what about the shed?"

"Demolished. Can't you see? It 's gone."

We ran still faster.

The shed was absolutely demolished and is now only a shapeless mass of rubbish, but there are no signs of a shell — no traces of burned timbers, no splinters. One would have thought that it had folded up and laid down on its side like a house of cards.

When we reached the shed we saw Chocolate's great neck and shoulders and enormous head free from the rubbish which hid the rest of his body. He was stretched out full length on his side, browsing serenely on the young shoots of an apple tree, which had gone down with the building. His large eye looked us over as we stood there, overcome and absolutely stupefied with amazement, as much as to say:

"What . . . you 've come at last . . . you need n't have been in so much of a hurry."

I ran to the air-hole of the cellar.

"Hey there, men with spades; quick, come, dig out Chocolate."

"Dig out Chocolate!" and they all rushed out utterly surprised by the announcement of such a job.

The bricks were scattered with a few blows of the shovels, the beams raised, and the place cleared away.

With all the ease of a circus horse who has been playing dead, Chocolate stretched out his front feet, then his hind ones, balanced himself two or three times, took a spring, and without the slightest hurry stood up, shaking himself all over like a dog coming out of the water.

There were a few scratches on his hide, but it was an old hide, hard and tanned, which resists everything. Nothing broken! Brave Chocolate, come on! The men all look at him, admire him, and fondle him. He seemed somewhat surprised by such manifestations of great affection.

And without a care in the world for the bombardment which was beginning again, he went to the nearby pond and drank deeply.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AEROPLANE

DAWN had just broken. Some of the boldest of the men in the echelon were already up, rubbing down their horses and adjusting the breast collars. At daylight we had to go a long way to exchange the pack-saddles for munition-wagons.

This has been the way from the start. The companies of machine guns, probably even more than the other branches of service, although I don't know, are experiment stations on which they try one sort of gear one day and another the next. First it is a round shield, then a square shield, and then a periscope. We adopted the Wikers saddle, only to have it replaced with the Hotchkiss. And we had scarcely put it in service than it was withdrawn to give us ammunition wagons.

These changes are one of the slight distractions of the trade. They must distract still more the handlers of the public funds to judge by the frequency they offer them to us.

But what difference does it make to us whether we do one thing or another? While we wait time passes and the war goes on.

And then "there 's no use trying to understand."

That is the typical expression in every army. Before the most unexpected orders, the most unusual, which seem the most useless and incoherent, we can only bow without trying to use our intelligence.

"There is no use in trying to understand." That 's the whole secret of discipline. If one did try to understand, he would never obey — or too late.

We were ordered to assemble on the Place at daybreak, and at daybreak we were there. The clear sky is splendidly luminous.

"Good weather for aeroplanes," said someone.

Indeed it was good weather for aeroplanes, for there was n't a cloud in the sky and no mist on the ground. A reconnaissance in such weather should be easy.

The Boche aviators are early birds. One sees them but rarely during the daytime, when ours mount guard on the lines, but their specialty is getting up early in the morning. We hear them flying over our cantonments long before daybreak, at the first rays of dawn, and see them returning rapidly to shelter as soon as the light becomes clearer and it becomes easier to fire our cannon and machine guns.

Presently, as I am giving a final inspection to the material we are to turn in, I meet Sergeant Lace in the yard of the sawmill.

"Oh, but you 're an early bird to-day."

"I 've just been ordered to find a good place to fire on aeroplanes and take up my position there at once. There 's going to be a section there each day. Mine starts."

"Have you found your emplacement?"

"Not yet. But that 's not hard to find. Just a hole or a sloping place, so that we can stretch out on our backs."

"I know just the place for you. The hole of a '320' at the entrance of the village on the left, near the poplars. You 'll see it right up against the fence which borders the road from Caix."

"Wonderful. I 'll take up my position there. It must have been dug expressly for me."

A half hour later the cavalry of the three machine-gun companies of the regiment assembled in front of the church.

Cavalry! . . .

My good comrade, Roudon, a sergeant-major in the Hussars, who is now with the first company of machine guns in a position like mine, becomes furiously angry every time he hears that word "cavalry."

"Cavalry! Cavalry!" he roars. "You ought to say an assery, a mulery. Just look at them. Not one in ten stands up on his feet. And the riders! There is n't one who could ride a horse. They 're afraid!"

Roudon is an experienced cavalryman. For ten years he knew the mad, intoxicating dashes with the Algerian contingents in Morocco, the mysterious attractions of reconnaissances in the long reaches of the valleys of the Sahara, impetuous charges and wild triumphant pursuits among the red Spahis with their Damascus swords, amid the glistening sands which rise toward the sun in golden spangles. At the beginning of the war he was thrown into a regiment of metropolitan cavalry and fought in Lorraine and Belgium. He lived through the horrible hours of retreat, assuming the perilous mission of rearguard while the other regiments withdrew in good order. He fought on foot, in the edges of woods, to stop to the last moment the march of the enemy while the rear went on to the Marne. He endured those long, seemingly endless, waits on foot in front of his horse, the bridle on his arm, saber in scabbard, under the storm of shells and the invisible menace of bullets. There were no trenches then.

Roudon is a cavalryman in his soul and his love for the service. So, attached to an improvised service which is neither cavalry, artillery, nor infantry, he does not know what to make of it, and he rages at it through his excess of conscience and too exclusive love of duty perfectly done.

The echelon of the third company arrives on the Place in good order a few seconds after us. Hémin leads it and he marches on foot beside his column, hands in his pockets, whistling.

Hémin is a type, and not the least interesting among the complex personalities of our command, for we are cavalrymen transformed into infantry, but we 're still cavalrymen just the same.

Hémin is as much a cavalryman by trade as Roudon, and perhaps even more so. He was successively a stable boy in a racing stable at Chantilly, then a jockey, and finally a trainer, after he had done his military service in a regiment of chasseurs. So he is a horseman par excellence. But he never made war as a cavalryman before. Since the beginning of the war he has been attached to various services. First, he was an infantry scout, a standard bearer for a general, a courier for a major, and he was transferred to the companies of machine guns when they were definitely established. Hémin has a style all his own. To all appearances he is neither a cavalryman nor a foot soldier. His jacket is a Colonial one with anchors and cuff-facings, but it has white stripes. He wears great yellow boots, a cavalryman's spurs, his breeches are reinforced with olive leather, and his head is covered with a very small black cap. Another curious characteristic is that Hémin, the excellent horseman, always walks when he accompanies his detachment.

When we are assembled, we turn the command of the detachment over to Roudon, the senior officer, and he leads the way. Hémin and I bring up the rear some distance back.

In files of two our one hundred and fifty horses and mules form a long column, unwieldy and slow, which winds along the road.

"A fine target for an aeroplane!"

This exclamation had hardly been uttered when the well-known roar of a Boche aeroplane was heard over our heads.

"Zut! there 's one. . . . We ought to have expected it in such weather and started earlier. Look out, if he spots us. Don't worry, there 's no danger, he 's too high. . . . At least three thousand."

A "75" was already weaving around this scarcely visible, extremely mobile target the white tuffs of its shrapnel, and threw around the machine a murderous circle which followed it in its evolutions. But the aeroplane in the air seemed to care little and it continued on its way.

We all followed the vicissitudes of the fight as we went along, heads in the air. When a shell seemed to burst very near, an exclamation came from every mouth.

"Oh! . . . that did n't miss much."

"A little more to the left; that would get him."

"Oh, that missed. . . . He 's too far."

"This is outrageous . . . he's gone . . . he's getting away."

And as a matter of fact the aeroplane gets away . . . outside the "75's" field of fire. It guides itself no doubt by the white ribbon of the road which shows clearly against the rich green of the pastures.

He has seen us now. He has seen us crawling, winding and unrolling on the ribbon. He heads straight for us, circling around in circles of which we are without a doubt the center, and gradually comes lower.

"Look out for the bombs."

"No . . . he 's half turned . . . he 's going back."

"Going back. . . . You 'll see."

He 's lower now and we can see distinctly the great black crosses under his wings.

All our men are looking. The horses seem to scent the danger, for they prick up their ears and paw the ground, while the mules neigh.

Suddenly from on high something begins to glide along some aerial rail and shatters the air above us. That lasts a second, a flash. As we listen and wait one would have said that it falls slowly and for hours. We look in the direction of the noise as if to see something, as if to see where the bombardment is going to fall. It seems like a linked chain which rolls out, clashing its links against each other.

A tremendous boom, and black smoke, greenish and red as well, blacker, denser, thicker than that from the great shells, rises in the middle of the field a hundred and fifty yards on our right.

And there is another. It bursts on our left at the same distance. He is certainly searching for the range. Will the next strike in the middle and right on the mark? We 're a fine mark, to be sure, a fine target, — one hundred and fifty horses in Indian file. If he does n't make a good shot he 's a duffer.

Roudon stands up in his stirrups, turns around, and shouts commands to the uneasy men:

" Close up, close up, close up, I say. . . . Dress up together."

He leads the column rapidly, now closed up into a compact group like a flock of sheep, towards the road from Harbonnières, which is lined with trees that will conceal us from the aeroplane.

Two other bombs burst behind us one after another.

" That makes four. He can't have many left. He did n't bring a truck! "

Some hundred yards away near a pond cows graze absolutely indifferent to the battle in the air. The "75" again begins to fire. Its bursts of shrapnel come close to the aeroplane but do not hit it.

Another bomb. I stop. It looks as though it were going to fall in front of us. I 'm not going to put my head under the knife. So I start to draw my horse back under the trees.

There it is. It has fallen in the fields again. But its explosion throws up dismal fragments, large and bloody ones. It fell squarely on the herd of cows and annihilated it.

" The bungler! He 's wasting the milk," comes in the accent of the faubourgs nearly under my horse's feet.

Hard by, in the hole of the " 320," Lace's half-section has placed its battery. I had approached it without seeing it as I drew back under the threat of the bomb.

" Say, how long are you going to let him do that? " I ask.

" Let him do it! . . . You don't mean that, Margis. He won't blow on his sauerkraut this evening."

" Wait and see what sort of a menu we 're going to serve that ace."

It was Grizard, an actor in the suburban theaters, speaking. He looks like the best natured and quietest of men, but he is a pitiless pointer who never lets his prey escape.

" Let me play a little, Margis. See how pretty he is, how fine, and how well he flies. It is too bad, a pretty little canary like that."

" Ah! Attention, ladies and gentlemen. Two turns, and at three we will commence. You 'll see what you will see."

" On with the music."

And the music begins the dance. First, come slow shots, rhythmic and irregular tac-tacs, spaced like the prelude to a slow waltz. Grizard is searching for the tune; then, gradually, he accelerates the time, and the tac-tac becomes faster.

Now he has the aeroplane in his field of fire

. . . the bullets dance around him in a ring of fire, without a break . . . the dance of death!

And the circle grows narrower and narrower, infernal, pitiless.

Everyone looks; there is nothing to see up there; bullets are elusive and invisible, but we make out the drama.

From his rapid evolutions, his sharp darts back and forth, his irregular and hurried spirals, we understand that the aviator has already been reached but is trying to baffle the fire which pursues him.

The tac-tac continues. It is incessant, implacable, ferocious. The silence of death hovers over men and things. All Nature seems to await the issue of the combat which is no longer doubtful.

I look at Grizard. Hand on the handle of the gun, he follows the evolutions of the aeroplane; his eyes shine as at a good trick he is playing on the acrobat up there, and softly, with all the desired expressions, as if he were before his audience at Belleville or at the Gaîté-Montparnasse, he hums:

Rêve de valse, rêve d'un jour,
Valse de rêve, valse d'amour.

"He 's hit," Sergeant Lace cries suddenly.

And indeed he is hit.

The wings waver, bend, warp, and abruptly fall in a spiral, while an immense burst of flame, which the speed increases immoderately, rises and marks the limpid blue of the sky with a long red thread which dissolves in the heavens in a trail of gold.

With a noise of broken iron, tearing canvas, explosions which recall fireworks, the machine smashes into the fields, right where the last bomb had destroyed the peaceful herd of cows a moment ago.

We run from all directions, but there is nothing to see. The aeroplane was completely destroyed by the fall and the fire, and ends by burning itself up.

It is impossible to get the charred body of the aviator out from the smoking ruins.

Grizard is on the scene with his gun crew, and examines his target.

"Good shot!"

We congratulate him and begin to go back. But Grizard is a comedian who knows his business and who has perhaps played a rôle in the circuits in faraway provinces, and he is not a man to miss an effect.

He stands by the roadside in the courteous attitude of Cyrano de Bergerac pointing out the way to the Count de Guiche after amusing him for a quarter of an hour. And Grizard, who has amused us for a quarter of an hour, but in another way, points out the road and says:

“ The quarter of an hour is past, Messieurs. I release you.”

CHAPTER IX

DAYS IN CANTONMENT

THE regiment is holding the first line trenches in front of the La Vache woods. When the company is in the lines, the echelons, the war train, and the clerks remain behind in the cantonment at Morcourt.

Morcourt is a delightful little village hidden in the green meadows under the poplars on the banks of the canal of the Somme. Morcourt was once a hamlet of one hundred and fifty houses and their flower gardens, but to-day it is a real village where there are crowded together a population of more than ten thousand men. More than twenty thousand horses are bivouacked in the neighboring villages of Proyart, Lamotte, Bayonvillers, which have no water, and they come to Morcourt twice a day to dry up the watering places.

Our quarters here are in the open fields. Everybody can't have covered shelters. The major of the cantonment showed us the field and said,

"Try to make shift with that."

And we did.

Less than an hour later the grass was mowed, ground down by our haltered horses, who devoured it with their sharp teeth.

Beyond, on the edge of the road, in impeccable alignment our sixteen ammunition wagons are parked.

Behind are the horses, the huts of the four sections of the echelon, and the war train.

And at the end the four large caissons of ammunition and the munition wagons.

Burette and Morin, the clerks, cannot make a simple tent do. More comfortable quarters are necessary for their work.

After a day of hunting around Burette came back to camp, radiant.

"*Mon vieux,* I 've found something wonderful. We 'll live like princes."

"Where did you get it?"

"Some fine people. It 's next to the mayor's."

"*Mince!* You look well. Did they offer you the house?"

"You 'll see. It 's better than that."

"Better than that!"

We stamped our feet in impatience. Such a windfall is worth while. If we stay here a whole month we shall be well lodged.

I was already rejoicing in the thought of being able to build a comfortable bed.

Saux, on whom devolved the delicate and most often difficult care of our getting moved, foresaw innumerable conveniences.

Morin alone remained sceptical. He is that temperamentally.

He sees no good in this north country. He has been morose ever since he left Provence, and he won't smile again until he hears tinkle in his ravished ears the familiar evocative sonorities of Avignon, Arles, Miramas, Le Pas des Lanciers, L'Estaque. The sun, the blue sky, the blue sea!

And how right Morin is!

The sun exaggerates, but in openness and beauty. The fogs are deceitful. . . . Far better to be dazzled than deceived. . . .

Morin distrusts the splendid cantonment of Morcourt. He knows those at Proyart, Chuignolles, Minacourt, Virginy . . . and others besides. . . .

Oh, for the commonest hut, the most modest cabin, ruined though it be and sordid, but haloed in the sun, flooded with clear light, bathed in the silver foliage of the olives, planted down there on the rocks of Pointe-Rouge or of L'Estaque, beside the sea, sheltered in the valleys of Camions, or perched on the hills of Allauch! How much better it is, how much better worth living in, than the most sumptuous castles buried in the damp forests where the stones are green under the moss.

High on a hill on the road to Harbonnières opens the courtyard of a farm.

Burette leads us there in triumph. It is his discovery. He crosses the court, and opens majestically a small low door, with a barrel on each side in which stunted geraniums vegetate miserably.

It is an old pig-sty!

Scraped and washed with a lot of water, it will be habitable. We 'll make something out of it. Burette borrows a long table and at once covers it with his innumerable account books. We make our beds against the walls.

Thirty ammunition caissons placed in double rows, a mattress stuffed with hay, a tent cloth, two covers — that 's our camp.

The corner at the back falls to Morin. It is the longest way of the room and he can stretch out his whole tall form at his ease, which he rarely finds it possible to do in the cantonments.

Night reserves various distractions for us.

First, the rats.

The rats descended from the dove-cote in a dense horde and made incursions on our haversacks, in mad gallops over our bed clothes — gigantic rats with interminable tails!

They used the open space between the beds as their lists and had real battles, biting, crying and moaning. The routed fugitives jumped over Morin's body to get to shelter and he shivered in terror.

Burette decided to try extreme measures, for hunting them with shoes has no effect. So he begins to sing one of the most beautiful tunes in his repertoire called " A Montparnasse." It must have thirty verses, all ending in an interminable " nasse . . . nasse . . . nasse."

It seems that it was a triumph of the boulevards, and no true lover of songs should be ignorant of it. Very possibly.

The rats must have shared my opinion, however, for they seemed to like the great triumph of the boulevards only moderately, but they remained quiet while the song lasted.

That song had another virtue, too. It put me to sleep and Burette as well. His voice dragged more and more, and grew more feeble, when a terrible cry pierced the night.

Morin shouted in terror.

We jumped for our electric lamps.

Their dim rays brighten the darkness.

Above Morin's head, through a hole in the mud wall which separates us from the neighboring stable, a calf — a young calf — gracious and smiling, has stuck his great red head, and has imprinted a caress on the face of our sleeping friend with his milky tongue.

"The salaud! He has bitten me," grumbled Morin, wiping off the dribble which stuck to his face.

"Get out, animal."

But the calf was insensible to this harsh invitation. He continued to endure the flashes from our lights with a placid eye, and, drawn no doubt by Burette's song, which seemed to him like familiar news, he began to bellow, waking up the whole stable, and the cows added their powerful voices to that of their offspring. . . . We slept no more that night.

The days which followed were not all exactly alike.

The lieutenant sent us word by a cyclist to come and see him in the lines and get the list of changes to be made among the men and horses.

We started at daylight and went in the company wagon as far as Froissy. When we got there, Morin told me that he knew a wonderful short cut which avoided the great détour by Éclusier, and led directly to the communication trench. Walking in the wet meadows where we sank in up to our ankles had little attraction for me. I preferred the hard highway and the towpath, but Morin knew the country and claimed that we would only have several hundred yards of bad walking and then we would reach a practicable path.

We walked more than an hour. The fog grew thicker and thicker, limiting our horizon to a few steps. There was never anyone in sight.

"My dear Morin," I said, "if your short cut is as wonderful as you say, it must be known. But at the moment it seems somewhat deserted to me."

Morin did not reply. There was no doubt that he was n't certain of his way, but he did not dare to admit his mistake.

The weather inclined one to melancholy.

We walked on in silence. The path was very narrow and we were obliged to walk one behind the other.

A sinister grumbling seemed to shatter the heavens above the fog.

Instinctively we hurled ourselves to the ground into the wet grass and mud.

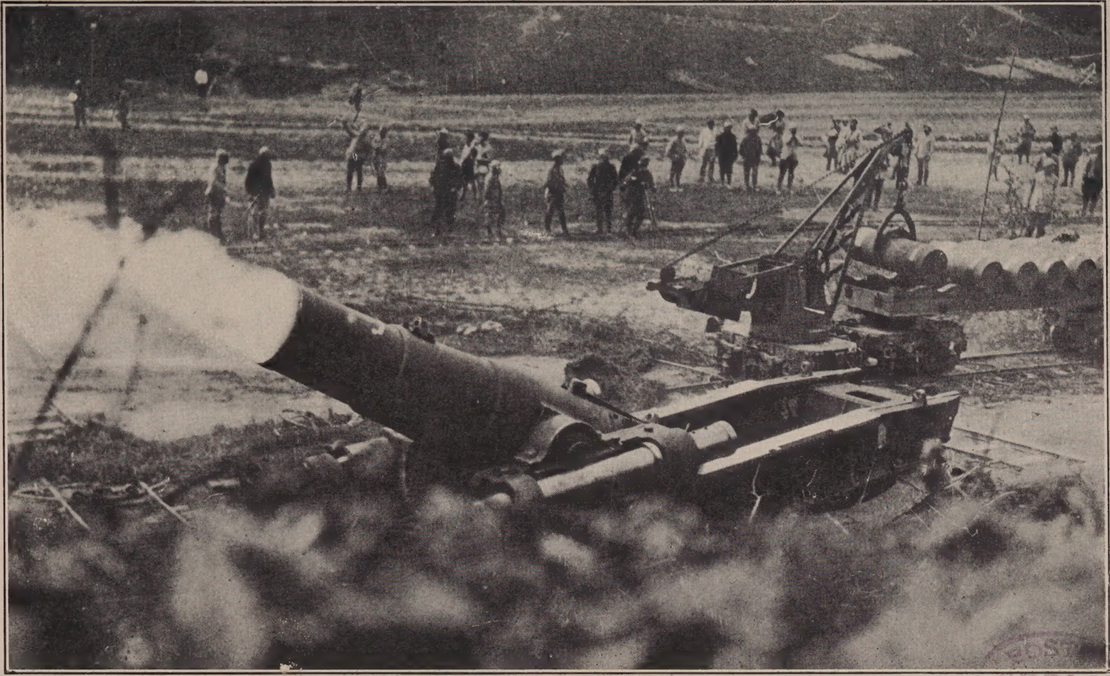
The shell passed over us and buried itself in the ground without exploding.

"This quarter hardly seems the safest in the world, Morin."

"They 're firing on the battery of '75's'."

"A battery of '75's'? What battery? . . . Where have you seen a battery?"

Although he was seriously disturbed about our direction, Morin would not budge.



A SINISTER GRUMBLING SEEMED TO SHATTER THE FOG *See page* 110

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" It was there day before yesterday. It must have moved."

" I suppose you 're sure your short cut has n't changed its place."

I had scarcely spoken when a shell followed the direction of the first and exploded beside us, throwing up a mass of mud, grass and water. The ground was soft and unfavorable for deadly splinters. In any other terrain we would have been hit seriously.

This time Morin hesitated,

" I 'm afraid I 'm mistaken! . . ."

" I was sure of it a long time ago."

" Let 's go on just the same; this must bring us out somewhere."

" That 's my opinion, too."

The fog was still heavy. We walked in a cloud the length of an interminable trench recently cut in the clay. The bottom was full of water. It leads us in an unknown direction. How can we find out what way we are going? Where are we? We follow its windings for half an hour and clamber over crossings. Perhaps we 're going around in a circle. The mist is about us all the time. We can see nothing. Not a landmark.

In the distance far to the north, in the English sector, a heavy gun hammers the air with loud regular shots. We started out at daybreak to go ten miles. It is ten o'clock now and we have no idea where we are.

I get impatient and begin to grumble.

The air becomes fresher, and a fairly strong breeze comes up. In a few seconds the blue sky reappears above our heads.

In front of us forms stand out — trees, shattered trees, stretching their dead branches like broken arms, and seeming to cry to heaven in entreaty for the martyred earth.

"The La Vache woods!"

We are in the La Vache woods within sight of the enemy's lines. Thirty yards from them! We are on the further side of the trenches, where the terrific storm of shells rages daily. We have the honor of being the finest target that will ever be offered for a shot with a grenade.

We throw ourselves flat, but the embankment overhangs the lines so much that even crawling is only a moderate safeguard.

"Nom de Dieu! I 'll remember your short cut! To go to the Boches it 's the best ever! . . ."

We slide along on elbows, stomach and knees like snakes, which puts our clothes to a severe test. And we let ourselves fall head first into the " Servian " trench, just over the lieutenant's sap, who cannot believe his eyes when he sees us fall as from the moon.

" Where did you come from? "

" We 've been taking a walk in the La Vache woods. Does that mean anything to you? "

" How did you come? "

" By a short cut! . . . a fine short cut, you know. I recommend it to you! "

Sub-Lieutenant Delpos was making his rounds in the sector and was told of the exploit. He is nervous and in a murderous humor, for he spent a sleepless night on a special mission between the lines. So Morin caught it a hundred times worse than he deserved. Sub-Lieutenant Delpos's moments of ill humor are, like some storms, violent but quickly over. The adventure ended with an excellent cup of coffee, flavored with XXX brandy, which he offers us in his sap, sumptuously furnished with every possible comfort, twelve yards underground.

Towards midnight I went down to Éclusier through an English observation trench. It is only accessible at night. In the daytime a Boche machine gun is placed on the other side of the Somme and enfilades it. It is suicide to venture there. Cut out of the rock in the hillside, its ridges are short and steep. It is a bad trench, but an important short cut. . . . Saux should be waiting for me with the horses in a ruined house behind the church.

Éclusier is a hamlet on the left side of the canal. There is a single street with ragged houses on each side, but they are not badly ruined. The church, protected by a bend in the cliff, still has its steeple intact through some prodigy of equilibrium, although the roof has fallen in. At the side, in what was once the presbytery, is the regimental dressing station.

Lights come and go.

Men are coming back from fatigue duty, searching for their dugouts by feeling for them. Through the air-holes, from which come odors of cooking, one can see lighted cellars.

I make my way by the aid of my electric lamp through this labyrinth which was once a street, and I find the house. I guess at it, rather, from the pawing of the horses, which are nervous and are pounding on the flagstones. It is an old grocery and its sign still reads: " Fine Wines — Desserts — Choice Preserves." A ragged green cart cover takes the place of the door. I raise it.

A gust of foul air hits me in the face, and I stop on the threshold gasping for breath. I see Saux asleep, his head on my saddle, and rolled up in horse blankets. Burette is asleep beside him.

Burette, the quartermaster, spent three months in the heavy artillery. He is an enthusiast on horses, but his equestrian ability is far from equaling his love for it. His style produces many falls, but they don't discourage him.

I wake up Saux, who gets up dizzily. Is he half drunk, I ask myself. That 's not like him at all.

" Look, Saux, what 's the matter? "

But Saux leaned against the partition, searching for the door with his haggard eyes. He dashed outside seized by nausea. The noise woke up Burette, and he too got up with difficulty.

" Say, what have you two been up to? "

" Oh, *mon pauvre vieux,* I don't know, but I 'm sick."

"The fact is there is considerable of an odor here; you might have found a better . . ."

The horses are troubled by it, too. Kiki jumps about and paws furiously. Burette's and Saux's horses are sleeping heavily and their breathing is difficult and oppressive.

There 's something wrong somewhere, although the enemy has n't sent over any gas.

With the aid of a light we poke about in the dark. I see a pile of canvas in the corner of the room which is oozing with dampness. I raise the bottom of the canvas with my stick and a swarm of great flies comes buzzing out around us.

There are the bodies of German soldiers abandoned for no one knows how long. Weeks, perhaps; since the attack on Fries without doubt. The blue swollen flesh is spotted by bites made by the teeth of rats. They are rotting and filling the soil with purulent matter.

With their monstrous faces, sunken eyes, cheeks fallen in, and their mouths convulsed by their last struggles, they seem still to shout with the fright of their last hours. Burette and Saux have slept beside this charnel-house.

We lead out the horses in a hurry and saddle them in the open air. We gain the hard towpath, the only practicable way, and go on at a lively pace.

The first light of dawn appears. At the bridge at Éclusier we stop a minute before climbing into the saddle. The Territorials there offer us a cup of coffee. It warms us, for the morning fog on the Somme is always cold.

"To horse!"

I decide to go at a good pace as far as the bridge at Froissy and take the lead. We must get along before the towpath is encumbered by all the loafers of the companies which are resting in the huts along the length of the canal.

A battery of "75's" in position near the military cemetery at Cappy is firing shells.

We pass very close to some guns as they are starting off. Coquet is frightened, jumps, and dashes into the fields, heading straight toward the hedges of some vegetable gardens.

"Attention! Burette, pull on the bits."

"Don't be afraid. He knows me."

He knows him so well that Burette had scarcely spoken than Coquet stopped short before the fence. Burette went over alone, head first, and landed in the vegetables. Fortunately, the ground is soft, but in hurdling the obstacle he bumped into some bushes, and gets an eye bruised and a cheek scratched.

"That 's nothing. That 's all right," he says.

He remounts his horse, laughing and singing:

Ah! les p'tits pois, les p'tits pois,
C'est un legume très tendre.

He can appreciate them this time.

We meet Hémin, our comrade of the third company of machine guns, at Froissy. He came out at dawn with orders from his commandant and is going back to Morcourt, and we go along together.

Going from this bridge to that at Méricourt, the towpath is almost deserted. Hardly anything crosses our path except some English motorcyclists.

Hémin is riding a superb charger, a great long-legged, bright chestnut, who carries his head proudly — a fine beast.

Some yards away from the branch from Neuville marines from the gunboats have planted huts along the towpath between the poplars.

The regular trot of our horses sounds clearly along the way.

A marine hears us and raises the flap of his tent to see us.

This frightens Hémin's horse and he jumps into the canal.

Our comrade is unhorsed and disappears under the water. We jump down. But even before we jump two marines have plunged in. Others poke around with poles in the mud from a boat. In an eddy a hand appears, then a head, swollen, bloody, crushed.

Hémin got a blow from a shoe full in the face and could not swim.

The body is brought on to the bank.

A surgeon from the gunboat doubles his efforts in vain.

Hémin is dead.

We buried him in the little cemetery at Méricourt one Sunday morning.

It is the ideal cemetery of the poets, hidden in green from every sound. Each grave seems alone in a thicket of lilacs and honeysuckle. No scientific gardening here; no trees butchered by experts; no cultivated flowers; no bombastic marbles. The grass overruns the paths; the simple flowers of the field have blossomed on the graves, thus bringing in every season the natural homage which returning life pays to the dead.

Nature is pleased to shut every sound from this field of rest.

At the end of a lane, at the foot of a willow, we lay Hémin to rest in his last sleep.

The men of the echelon come, the major, a captain, and the officers who knew him particularly well. The intelligence officers of the three companies joined in buying a wreath and came to the services together.

Hémin's captain speaks a few words. It is not the time for a long talk, for a simple touching farewell is sufficient.

And before he goes each one throws in the grave the symbolic bit of earth.

Sad duty!

Before the grave is filled in I drop over him petals of peonies. . . .

Poor fellow! He is not the most unfortunate. He is in that luminous land of day and knows what we are powerless to know. He has finished with our poor human troubles, and on him have fallen the curtains of his last resting place.

But those who are left, his wife, his child! . . . That is where sorrow begins. They don't know yet, and for a long time they will know nothing and will live in anxiety.

To-day, at the very hour perhaps, when we let him down in his last resting place, his wife received the letter he wrote her yesterday morning. She read this letter to her child, this letter in which he announces his next arrival on leave, where he said to her,

" In a week or two I shall be with you without a doubt." He never will be now, or, rather, he is there already, for the immaterial presence of loved ones accompanies us, if it is true that they are loved and are not forgotten.

And pensively, under the fine rain which is falling, we return to our cantonments.

CHAPTER X

AN ORDINARY FATIGUE PARTY

THIS evening the first section has to go on the works. The men have eaten earlier than usual, and they are on the road before nightfall.

The column remains in good order to the end of the cantonment, but once across the passage by the knotty elm at Harbonnières, it breaks ranks. Each one goes along as he likes, talking or alone.

There is madness in the air. We prefer another order of things than to spend one evening out of two in the first line digging in the mud.

" Rather the trenches where we can snooze in peace," they say.

The column trails along. Pierron, the sergeant who leads it, pays no attention. With Millazo, a tradesman from Hanoï who has arrived just recently, he talks of Indo-China, of Saigon, and their gardens.

We had scarcely arrived at the end of the sunken road which opens out on an uncovered slope on top of a ridge than a well-known whistling shatters space. Each of us throws himself on the ground, in a ditch behind a tree, and the shell passes over us in the air.

"That was n't meant for us."

Then another, still another, and dozens like it; we count up to sixty.

"M . . . what are they having at Proyart for dessert?"

That is all the concern they have about what is going on in the rear, or about the havoc and death the bombardment is launching at this moment on the cantonment where their comrades live. That is the egotistical indifference which long experience with danger gives, and the constant contemplation of death. The column marches along more carefully and wider awake, concealing themselves from the view of the enemy's aerial observers which are to be seen high on the horizon in spite of the late hour and the twilight which has already begun to grow dark.

"Do you suppose they 've forgotten the sausage?"

"Sometimes they stay out to give us a shot."

So we wait until it is very dark before we reach our position in the works.

The place where we have to dig is in the front lines. We have to construct circular dugouts for machine guns, with their rounded platforms, and to connect them with the trench by underground trenches.

We climb over the trench carrying our tools in our hands and slip between the barbed wire; but we have scarcely gone a yard when a heavy fusillade warns us that this time we are spotted. We dig in.

"Is anyone hit?"

No reply, no groans; everyone is there, flat, stretched out. We wait flat in the grass and the mud until the star shells fall, and as soon as one has, and before the following one has scaled through space and lighted it with its dim light, we jump into the hole which the fatigue party of yesterday dug.

But the tools are n't idle, although we guess rather than hear the blows of the pick digging in the deep rich earth and the shovelers throwing it out as far on the parapet as possible so as not to form a salient.

We dig for hours without interruption, lowering our heads in the holes as the star shells go up, and taking up our tasks as soon as it is dark again.

The enemy has discovered the time of our fatigue parties, and to-morrow it will know the exact position of our work, so that it will be somewhat uncomfortable to continue. It must be finished to-night.

A company of Territorials is stretching barbed wire on our right.

Between each star shell we can hear the hammering of the sledges against the stakes, the strain of the tension on the wire, and when the traitorous light shines again these wonderful workers don't even hide. They remain hanging on the barbed wire, motionless and disjointed like corpses. They look so much like them that the enemy does n't even fire, as he feels certain that he has annihilated this gang which heroically continues its gigantic task.

"Look! . . . they 're like statues."

"One would think it was a party . . . there are the lights and the orchestra."

The time for supplying the company in the lines comes. The men of the field kitchens come by groups of three or four from the trenches just behind us.

The first two have a long rod on their shoulders and rolls of bread on this. Others carry in canvas pails and kettles come from nowhere the coveted wine and the aromatic brandy. Others bend under the weight of pots which hold lumpy black bean soup, which splashes out at every jolt in the path. It is already cold and greasy. Finally, the mess corporal reaches the end of his trip and draws out of his sack the desserts bought with the mess balance and the commissions given to him the day before by the men in the trenches. The pockets of his jackets are full of letters he has just received from the officer with the mail, and which he delivers to the men who have been waiting for them hungrily.

When he gets as far as the fatigue party he stops and hesitates. He must go over a space of fifty yards, absolutely exposed, to the edge of a group of trees where there is a first-line trench taken from the Boches in the last attack and not yet connected with the communication trench.

He has reason for his hesitation, for the last two days the Boche trench on our left has been firing on it heavily.

Day before yesterday an entire fatigue party was killed. We can see there in front of us the abandoned sacks and scattered packages. Five men out of eight were killed yesterday. The others were able to get over some of the provisions and the bad news by crawling, and at the price of a thousand risks. They also took the rest of the provisions from the bodies of their comrades who carried them. To-day they advanced the time of bringing the supplies an hour in order to foil the enemy's vigilance. This time the mess corporal accompanied the fatigue party himself to discover, if possible, a less perilous mode of communication. But the Boches must have been on the watch, or guessed or got wind of it somehow. The star shells now follow each other with no let-up, lighting up the road so that one can't venture on it. Under this too persistent light the Territorials abandon their simulation of corpses and seek shelter in the trench to which we are getting ready to return.

It is necessary for the supplies to go on. The company in the front line has had only insufficient provisions for two days.

The mess corporal is a brave man and makes several attempts to venture outside, but each time he is received by a fusillade and only has time to throw himself backward in the trench.

The fatigue party has been watched and waited for.

We hold a council of the non-commissioned officers and the lieutenant of the Territorials which has held the position for several weeks. Various stratagems are proposed and we weigh the chances, but after consideration all of them are vetoed. It is impossible to get by even at the greatest speed without risking the lives of several men, and perhaps of all.

Still, if we were able to draw the attention of the Boches, to occupy them with something else, to enfilade them, to shell them.

“ Enfilade them . . . shell them. . . .”

“ Is n’t there some place from which we can enfilade them? ”

And we all considered in our minds the position of the Boche trenches.

" We can't do anything from here," said a sergeant who had spent various periods in these trenches for several months, and knew every corner of it; " but below there to the left, about a hundred yards from the picket post, is a ruined cabin which dominates everything. But there 's nothing doing in getting there; it 's too near; they 'd see us as plain as day."

One of our men heard all this. And while the conversation went on, I saw him climb up on the parapet and examine the position.

It was Marseille, an impetuous, headstrong type. He rebelled at all discipline, he was restive under observation, but his bravery was unfailing, and he was absolutely oblivious to danger, which he ignored with a swagger and indifference which seemed amazing. Marseille has known one hundred thousand adventures and turned one hundred thousand tricks, and has always come back absolutely unharmed.

When he was on his last leave he spent six unrestrained days in innumerable drinking bouts in all the bars at La Cannebière, where he narrated his boasted deeds of prowess, which were probably much inferior to the real ones. Then, instead of going back, he waited for them to come and get him. He was arrested on the eighth day and brought back to the Corps by the provost. Marseille was not the least upset when the officer demanded the reasons for his delay, and replied:

"I don't like to travel alone. I like society, I do. So I have had a whole car to myself and my escort. And besides, I knew very well that the gendarmes would n't come from Marseilles here without buying a drink, and they wouldn't have the nerve to lap it all up without offering me some. I like the gendarmes. That may seem strange to you, but I do."

Marseille is a good singer and his number appears in all the company concerts. His throat is as clear as the sunny lights of La Corniche and L'Esterel, and he can render the final trills of the Neapolitan songs with the best.

When he had finished his rapid observation he came back to our anxious group and spoke to the mess corporal:

"You'll be all right, *mon vieux*. You'll get there."

And we all looked at him in open-mouthed surprise at such assurance.

" Have you any news or an idea? Explain. Tell us something about it. Let us see."

" You 'll get there, as I told you. Don't bother about those fellows over there. That 's my job. Watch me."

And to the lieutenant who was getting ready to question him:

" You have a machine gun, have n't you, Lieutenant. . . . Won't you lend it to me . . . just a minute? It 's a Saint Etienne. I know that. . . . I know them all. . . . They 're all the same. . . . And five belts with it to amuse the Boches for five minutes. . . . That 'll be enough for the cooks to get over."

We understood it all, and we laughed and admired him. Marseille rolled up the barrel of the machine gun and the belts in several thicknesses of canvas, tied a rope to it and attached the other end to his wrist.

" Hold on to the package so that it won't make trouble on the stones, and when I pull on the rope twice, let it come."

And he crawled out of the trench and slid down towards the ruined hut.

We waited anxiously the full ten minutes. We watched the cord unroll with varying emotions. It stopped, stood still, immovable. Has he arrived?

Then we felt the two jerks, and the lieutenant let the heavy package slide, and it got mixed up in the stakes, rocks, and gullies, and made such a metallic noise that it could not help attracting the Boche's attention. And it had an effect. The enemy believed that we were making some sort of a movement, and launched in our direction a heavy fusillade which we refrained from answering.

Again ten minutes passed . . . they were interminable.

Then suddenly came the machine gun . . . ours . . . Marseille's.

Slowly at first, it sent out its irregular tap-tap, then the cadence became faster, and then a steady crackle. The Boches were taken in the flank and thought that we were making an attack, and Marseille, who saw them running by the light of their star shells, shouted out,

" Forward, the cooks, run, nom de Dieu! "

The fatigue party rushed out at top speed. Soup spatters from all sides. The rations of wine and coffee will be short. The men disappear in the wood. They are over; they are safe.

Now the German bullets are raging to our left about the hut; rockets go up asking for artillery. In front of our lines close to us explosions rock the ground. Their artillery is firing in the right place. The fatigue party is over but the Boches have another prey. By this time Marseille is stewing away in the ruins of his shelter.

While the shelling lasts we discuss his last feat, safe in the sap, while we munch the last of our cold repast. Then, as dawn begins to appear and we have to return to the cantonment at daybreak, we begin to get ready to go. Before we go we share a bucket of wine which the overloaded fatigue party could n't carry in its dash and abandoned.

But a shadow stands before us in the sap.

" So they share their leavings and there is none for the hungry? "

It is Marseille, safe and sound, whole, without a scratch. Everyone crowds around him, and the officer runs up.

" And now, if you 'll pull in that string, you 'll bring back the tools. I 'm sore on that machine. You know, Lieutenant, that gun was n't our Hotchkiss. I had to dismantle the breech; it jammed at once. I could n't have fired more than half a belt. Fortunately, they gave me light with their star shells; I could n't have done it without them."

CHAPTER XI

WITH MUSIC

WE are in reserve cantonments at Chuignolles, and we all lodge together at the end of the village, near the church, in a large house, which is n't injured much and which once served the servants of the presbytery. We were shaken up in our last action, and they give us comparatively generous liberty, no manœuvres, no reviews, and no drills. The section leaders have seen to the arms and ammunition and have secured an entirely new equipment from the ordnance officer.

The infantry have turned gunners over to us to fill up our ranks.

The lieutenant recommends the men to distract themselves with games, gossip and songs.

At his solicitation we organized a concert, several concerts, in fact. Each section has its artists which it believes in and of which it is proud.

One evening in the garden adjoining the officers' quarters we were endeavoring to draw out the meal by chatting, but conversation flagged as night drew near. So Sub-Lieutenant Delpos, who was opposed to dreaming as engendering melancholy, demanded a concert at once, immediately.

The cantonments were scattered about in the surrounding gardens.

" Croharé," he said, " run to each section and bring back artists — all the artists in each company must be here in five minutes."

And five minutes later they were there. All the company, too, for each section followed its artists, who were to shine in all the glory of their repertoire before the officers and the " little staff."

We had singers, comedians and speakers, professional and amateur. Jacquet gave with exquisite artistry several delightful songs, the words of which he had composed and adapted to well-known tunes. The " Lettre à la Marriane " was really touching.

Gaix and Corporal Vail sang with real talent and gave us a full repertoire from the operas. The indefatigable Marseille gave, in a hilarious gibberish, an Italian-Marseilles thing which brought down the house with wild laughter.

"It's too bad we haven't a piano to play the accompaniments," said someone.

"A piano! I'll attend to that," said the ever-resourceful Chevalier. "Four men in my bunch, and I'll bring it at once."

Some minutes later the party brought in an enormous harmonium which it had found in a room of the presbytery. That harmonium had been the silent witness of famous battles, had been taken and retaken with the village. It had played "Die Wacht an Rhein" under the German heel, the "Rêve Passe" with the artillery, "Sidi-Brahim" with our Blue Devils, and it was still in good condition and almost all the notes played.

"And now we have a piano, we must have a player."

"Oh, there, 'Father Music.' You know this is your job. You played for us last summer in the church at Minaucourt."

"Father Music" smiled gravely and pushed his way through the groups.

A candle stuck in the neck of a champagne bottle and placed on the harmonium lighted up his Christlike face with a golden light.

He seated himself, without stopping smiling, on a pile of ammunition caissons which served as a piano stool, and — honor to whom honor is due — since we are machine gunners, he begins the "Song of the Machine Gun," with Gaix singing the first stanza.

"Father Music" stands out in the light in the middle of the dark night and this group of a hundred men who one surmises are there, rather than sees, squatting on the grass around the instrument.

Under his cap thrown back on his head the hair shows sparse and thin, his beard is large and tangled, and he smiles through his large, clear eyes. His lips move with the singer, and he sings the song with as much fervor and composure as if he were chanting a Halleluiah.

"Father Music!" . . .

He is a fine figure in our society, rich in epic types.

I have seen him near us for some weeks, as much in our echelon as in the company of which he assumes the duties of infirmary orderly. I have learned to know him, and to know him is to love him.

By scraps, by fragments of phrases, for he speaks but little — little of himself, but instead launches out in real flights of declamation about an idea, a poem, a well-known tune, the names of artists — I have been able bit by bit and through deductions almost to reconstruct his life.

He is a quiet man in all his ways, habits and ideas. He lived in the quarter of Saint-Sulpice in an old house in the quiet Rue Madame, and made his living by giving music lessons in the institutions in the neighborhood.

They knew him in the quarter as " Monsieur Placide." On the appointed days at the same hours he went to the Nuns of the Immaculate Conception, to the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, or to special lessons in the city, without ever wandering far away from the quarter, in the old venerable houses, in the Rues d'Assas and Garancière.

On Sundays he played the organ in a small chapel of the Visitation Sisters.

The people knew little about him through social intercourse, for he never went out, or rarely. In summer he sometimes went to the Tuileries to listen to secular music — and that is all.

When in August, 1914, the notices of mobilization called all able-bodied men to arms, his orders were to join a regiment of Colonial infantry in a fort around Paris.

This man lived a regular life apart from dangerous contingencies, and was unacquainted with worldly ambitions and political strife, but he went to war knowing nothing of it, and considering it only a little and then through a professional viewpoint, as a sort of great drama in which he was going to play a comparatively passive rôle.

Under the cap and great coat of the infantryman, bristling all over with equipment, he was the typical "poilu" — the poilu of tradition. His large beard covered the front of his brown coat, and this gave him the proud appearance of a veteran.

At first he was going to sacrifice this thick beard which he had spared since his liberation from his regiment, but his officers wanted him to keep it. That brought him a place at the head of the company on the march, and he drew all eyes. He was the poilu.

His reputation as a musician who played on any and all instruments was quickly known throughout the cantonments. So he was at all the ceremonies and all the merrymakings. In the morning on a harmonium carried to an open field he might accompany a military mass said by stretcher-bearers, while that evening he might play on a chance piano, perhaps on the same harmonium, at improvised concerts, accompanying jolly, broad songs sung by amateurs and playing the national hymns of the Allies, and astonishing even himself in the patriotic choruses.

And this man to whom everything that was not classical or the Gregorian chant was strange, who for twenty years of his life had taught successive generations Méhul, Gluck, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, to whom Massenet, Delibes and Gounod seemed profane, surprised himself by pounding out on a badly-tuned piano and singing with all his might the refrains of " Viens Poupoule," popular marches, and the ballads of the faubourg.

The soldiers had quickly named him " Father Music " and this nickname pleased him immensely.

That night an order came from the commanding officer:

" Two companies of machine guns will go with the utmost haste to Hill 174, northwest of Herbècourt, to stop the enemy which is trying to outflank our right."

At three o'clock in the morning we were at the position indicated.

A small chapel with a cross was situated on the top of the hill. The open space in front commands the road which descends gradually toward the Méréaucourt woods where the enemy is concealed.

We fortify our position in a few minutes. On both sides of the road a gun sweeps the slope and the approaches and guards the way out of the woods. In the little belfry which is shaped like a dove-cote another gun commands the woods and can disturb evolutions in the wood itself.

We use the material at hand to fortify our emplacements — bits of benches, a door of a confessional, and the railings of the chapel.

At our right across the road a company of riflemen also establish entrenchments, so well camouflaged that the enemy cannot see them until in its zone of fire, that is to say, too late.

The officer, a young sub-lieutenant, asks us not to fire until he gives the signal. He has the idea — and a good one — to let the enemy advance and come up the road. Here he would be unable to execute a converging movement and our gun in the belfry would sweep the right side of the road and prevent his turning aside, the company of riflemen would protect the left, and his section of Grenadiers would attack on the road.

We are confident of the strength of our positions and our means of resistance, and we wait for the launching of the attack without anxiety.

"Father Music" has organized his dressing station in the chapel in the shelter of the altar and now wanders around the building.

The church recalls familiar surroundings to him and he delights in looking at it. There are a few simple frescoes, pictures of the Crucifixion, where gigantic men stand out in relief against a background of microscopic mountains and Liliputian houses, and they interest him.

He lets his fingers wander over the keyboard of the harmonium which lies forgotten in the choir.

His comrades jeer,

"'Father Music' is going to play our *De Profundis*."

But the quiet does not last long. Towards five o'clock a frightful fire begins all at once. The troops in the front-line trenches, at the bottom of the hill, are decimated and cut down by a furious fire; they retreat and take refuge behind the defense works of the village.

We make our final preparations. Evidently the enemy is going to try to take the village and has already begun its destruction. A storm of great shells falls on the trenches, very near us, some yards behind the houses. We hear terrific explosions, the falling of roofs, and fires break out everywhere.

An order from the commander of the sector reaches us, "Maintain the position and hold on until the companies of reinforcements arrive."

The bombardment becomes more and more violent. As the sound of each shell whistles through the air we wonder if this infernal machine is going to strike in our dugout this time. And every two minutes, mathematically, the uproar comes again and this unimaginable suffering continues some hours. At the sound of each shell we close our eyes. We think of the loved ones with a calm certainty of never seeing them again. We begin to wish that it would end at once, rather than have to endure this terrible nervous tension longer.

And the reinforcements cannot advance under the avalanche of fire and shell. Are they going to let us be massacred on the spot without defense?

The Teuton artillery imagines that they have cleared the objective and their fire dies down. Cautiously but confident of their superiority and tactics, the Germans now appear in numbers.

Suddenly, violently, like a clap of thunder the "Marseillaise" bursts on our ears — tremendously.

It rushes out through all the breaches in the church; it comes through the cracks; it goes up through the fallen roof; it traverses the shattered windows. It unites in itself all human and celestial voices. The soul of a whole nation, the spirit of ancient glories, animates the old organ which sings its last song.

With all the strength of its breath, with all the breath of its pipes, filled to bursting, with all the sonority of its bass, its horns, its flutes and violins, the organ hurls forth the sacred song.

And it is not only the hymn of triumphant

Liberty and the indignation of an avenging people in the face of the invader. Magnified by the liturgical sounds on the ritualistic instrument of sacred music, it is the Hosanna of Glory, the Sursam Corda of Faith, confident in the approaching victory, the Resurexit of the triumphant Past, and the De Profundis of brutal domination.

And beside all that, all the songs of glory, all the exaltations of faith, all the clamor of Gregorian theogony vibrate in the notes of the "Marseillaise."

Under the humble vault of a hamlet chapel the organ plays the twice-blessed music, and intones the splendid Magnificat of the Republic, the hymn of the Trinity, thrice human, thrice divine, Liberty, Fraternity and Equality.

And, dominating all the sonorities of the organ, a thousand voices unite in a sublime burst of song,

"*Aux armes, citoyens! . . .*"

"Grenades!" commands the lieutenant.

The men, electrified, mouths half open, the machines in their hands, spring out of the trench in the teeth of the enemy, but two steps from him. And with an irresistible dash they charge him, follow him, crumble him. The Teutons flee in terror. . . .

Night has fallen. Under a sky reddened by the lights of fires deep silence is over everything. Numerous reinforcements have arrived. The reconquered positions have been reorganized at once.

The general has been told of the exploit and he congratulates the officers and men, and promises them rewards. He also expresses a desire to see the church from which came the martial hymn which electrified the company.

All is dark. . . .

At the back near the altar a small lantern lightens the darkness . . . we approach.

On the ruined harmonium, forever silent now, "Father Music" sleeps. . . .

CHAPTER XII

"WE HAVE TAKEN A PICKET POST"

("Communique du")

THE asphyxiating shells which have been falling around us for forty-eight hours without a let-up have ceased. This morning the first rays of the sun filtered through the layers of gas and seemed to evaporate them. This lull was opportune. Our masks have long since been glued to our faces, and loosened by our heavy breathing they no longer adhere hermetically and begin to let in the toxins.

At last we are able to breathe at will and swallow our share of pure air.

Our sap opens on the side of a great quarry and commands the whole valley of the Somme. At our feet is the canal and towpath, at the right in a group of trees in the middle of the marshes are the ruins of Froissy; opposite us, behind the buttress of the La Vache woods, is the steeple of Éclusier.

The open space in front of our dugout forms a sort of terrace. Here we have laid out tables and dug seats in the chalk of the quarry. Men are descending by real scaling paths to get water from the canal, although it is against the major's explicit orders.

The towpath is visible from the enemy's trenches on the other side of the Somme. During the preceding days, those who tried to follow it to get back to Éclusier more easily were wounded by the fire of a machine gun which sweeps the way.

Our men come back from this expedition without accident, and we are able to proceed to our summary ablutions. We have not been able to do that for six days, and it is a real delight to feel the fresh water on our eyes and to rid the skin of its sticky moisture.

Two of our sections hold the first-line trenches twenty yards in front of us. We must relieve them presently. . . .

The artillery is still silent, and without a doubt the enemy has given up the stroke he was preparing. He was counting on the usual morning mist of the Somme, but this morning the air is very clear without a suspicion of fog. A fresh breeze blows from the north.

As we wait for the hour of relief, we talk, and an interminable game of cards goes on.

During the dark dreary days of forced seclusion in the bottom of the sap I discovered a very fine fellow, one of our comrades whom I had not had occasion to notice until then. He was very simple, talked but little, lived by himself, and I did not know his name.

Chance placed us side by side and permitted me to engage him in conversation.

Under a rough, taciturn appearance I found a soul full of kindness, a life touched by sacrifice, kindly, modest, the heroism of the humble who live simply for their long, hard tasks without complaining and without anyone being able to pity them in their sorrow and lighten their burdens.

One night — was it night? — hermetically sealed in the deep sap, lighted only by the wavering light of scanty candles, all our hours were nocturnal. Without the irregular arrival of supply parties we would have been absolutely ignorant of the flight of time.

One night, when the bombardment seemed to reach the final height of violence, when each blow shook our dugout, and the props groaned and threatened to yield — it would have been a merciless burial — our looks crossed and I read in his eyes a deep sorrow.

In spite of my natural reserve, out of respect to his deep suffering I was unable to contain myself long.

"Comrade," I said, "I read in your looks a great sorrow."

He seemed to come back to reality when he heard my voice!

"Fate has placed us near each other for some days. We don't know what to-morrow may bring. Can't I be of some use? Aid you in any way? Tell me!"

His eyes tried to smile a thanks. I saw his lips contract and then came tears, and before I could say anything he leaned his head on my shoulder and wept deeply.

It was not weakness, despair, or fear, but the unbridling of a heart shut up too long, the great gasp of a soul heavy with mental sorrows which might at last open itself, the gentle rain which brought the stifling storm of the nerves to an end.

He confided his life history to me in a few words.

He was a simple artisan of the laboring class, and his life had been full of grief and sorrow. After some years of struggles, and cares and stress together with his beloved companion, a daughter was born. But in coming into the world she took the life of her mother. And then he found himself alone in the world with this puny frail creature, born in grief and raised in sorrow.

In addition to his great love for her as a father he added his worship of the departed one. He limited his life to his grief, and made his house a memorial chapel where every object was a votive offering to his absent beloved and a relic of the ever-present dead. He adorned the little girl with her mother's modest jewelry, and cut her clothes from those she had worn.

Through this double love which he poured out on this child, she became his only reason for existence, his whole life.

The little girl was ten years old to-day. Brought up in the seclusion of the tabernacle, she had taken up her rôle conscientiously. She was quieter than most children of her age, and attentive to her father's slightest wish. As she grew up she developed into the very image of her mother, and the poor man began to live again as in a dream the days of his happy past.

When war broke out the implacable mobilization tore him from the fireside he had never left before. Living alone as they did, they had no friends and knew of no relatives.

He went, trusting the house to her and all their modest property, only recommending her to the watch of a neighbor, of a concierge.

But fortified by example, she suddenly grew up through the grief of this weighty separation, and the girl was already sufficient for the rôle as guardian of the hearth.

Ever since he had left she had written each week the letter which he waited for impatiently and which he read and re-read during the following days.

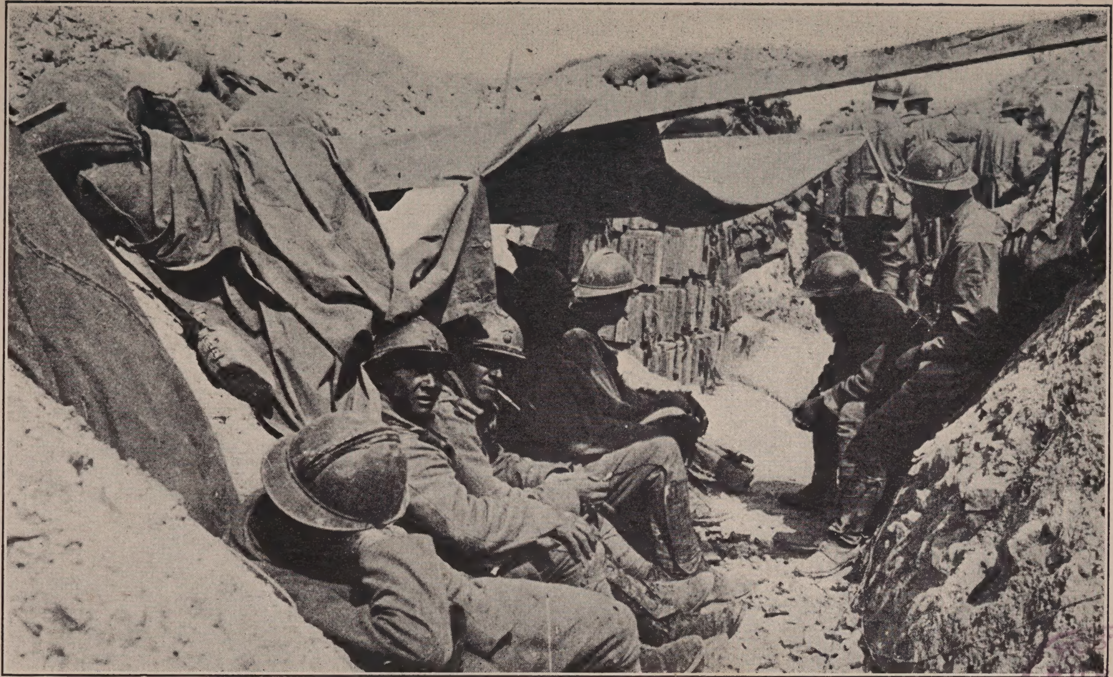
This morning he seemed more cheerful. It was not only the joy of finding himself in the open air again, of having finished with the constant danger of being buried alive, but also because now the bombardment had died down the officer with the mail would be able to bring to-day the letters which we had not received for six days.

The child had not failed to write a single time on the promised date and he knew that back in the rear a letter from his daughter was waiting for him and would come to-day. This thought made him cheerful.

At the relief I went with him into the front line trench. It was riddled with shell holes. Our barbed wire entanglements were almost destroyed, but the trench was not entirely ruined, and sandbags quickly put it in good shape again. An immense heap of bricks and smoking ruins cut off our view in front.

It was all that was left of a farmhouse called "La Maison Rose." It had been sharply disputed in terrible combats and had passed in succession from the enemy into our hands and then from ours to the enemy, to remain finally between the lines.

Our artillery was riddling this pile with shells to prevent the Germans fortifying it and making it a point of support commanding our trenches. But the mass of ruins stayed there and formed a



THE FRONT LINE TRENCH *See page* 154

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ridge which, if it was not dangerous, was at least annoying.

Sub-Lieutenant Delpos demonstrated to me by means of a periscope the use they might make of that pile of stones. He was a daring but prudent tactician and went on the principle that everything ought to be used to spare the men's lives, and that we should not neglect to take advantage of any incident in the terrain.

" Lieutenant, here 's an order."

The battalion intelligence officer handed him a paper written in pencil:

> " Chief of battalion of the company of machine guns. A reconnaissance of aeroplanes signals that the enemy are installing gas-throwing or liquid fire machines behind the pile of stones in front of your lines. Blow it up with several bombs on the ends to scatter it. Ask for volunteers."

" See what I told you. The Germans lose no time in utilizing the advantages of the terrain. See, behind that pile of stones they are installing their gas machines. They think they 're sheltered, but nothing is from our aeroplanes. Oh, the aeroplanes! "

A man from the engineers, who have received a similar order, comes with the explosives. He looks at the emplacement through a loophole, and turns to us whistling and shaking his head:

"*Mince!* That 's not going to be easy. One might be able to manage it at night, but by day . . . that 's going to be a real bird trap."

"What! What! What 's to stop your sticking your melinite sausage in that doghouse? Lend me your peephole. I 'm going to see how it stands."

It was Grizard mixing in the conversation; he had already taken the two bombs from the engineer's hands, which he let go with evident satisfaction.

"We ought to put one in each end of the buffet. Don't worry, Lieutenant. That 's a fine job and will be well done."

Grizard turns to his companion Marseille who is draining his two litre canteen without trouble.

"Oh, there, you. This will be a fine chance for a ballad. We 're going to play a trick on our neighbor opposite."

And then, as Marseille gave his opinion only by a look without letting go the neck of his canteen:

" Come, leave some until we get back. We 'll be thirsty."

The two volunteers got ready for their expedition at once. They each took a bomb and put it in their jacket pockets; protected their heads by a shield which they pushed ahead, and climbed up the bank, crawled under the barbed wire, and disappeared in the shell holes.

They had covered their heads with muddy canvas. If they remained motionless, three yards away one could not tell them from the ground.

Through periscopes we watched them advance. The lookouts in the enemy trench had not seen them yet. Not a shot. Absolute quiet.

The " doghouse " is thirty yards from our lines. Sliding along carefully as they must, ten minutes are necessary to get there. The time will seem long; longer for us than for them.

I am sure that while they are giving their whole attention to getting on in their adventurous spirits, entirely ignorant of the first feeling of fear, that they have no other idea in their heads than to play a good joke on the Boches. They are fine jokers! They have never been known to draw back from what offers, but when their lives are at stake. . . .

There is still nothing. Not a shot!

But how could the enemy lookouts see them? We ourselves who know their goal, who follow their trail, lose sight of them momentarily. Brown grass and burned shrubbery covers the ground at that spot; they must be there inside.

The ten minutes have gone now. Still nothing! ! !

Have they seen a danger we cannot see as they neared the goal, and have they burrowed themselves in the ground? Nevertheless, their mission is extremely urgent, and they know it.

Lieutenant Delpos nervously frets about and stamps his foot,

"I ought to have gone myself. . . ."

"Wait, there they are."

Marseille and Grizard are coming back; they are only ten feet from the trench.

But rash to madness, in their absolute unconsciousness of danger now that their mission is accomplished, they take no thought of themselves, and instead of sliding under the barbed wire, as they went, to get into the dugout Grizard stands up and shouts,

"Let the balloon go up."

At the same moment, a shower of bullets!

Grizard rebounded, twisted himself in a final contortion, and fell on his back while Marseille jumped into the trench shouting to his comrade,

"Have n't you finished playing the man-serpent?"

Then, when he saw that his comrade was absolutely dead, he burst out in wild anger:

"Nom de Dieu . . . Nom de Dieu . . . de nom de Dieu . . . If that is n't too bad. . . . He need n't stay there, the rascal. I 'm going to get him."

The explosion came, a frightful one; the bombs had just exploded.

"To the sap . . . to the sap. It 's going to rain stones."

The pile of stones is thrown up with tremendous violence. Blocks are thrown into the trench.

The smoke blows away and behind the scattered ruins we see two machine guns in position with their gun crews killed beside them, and all their material for fortifications and gas-making apparatus.

The sub-lieutenant jumps on the parapet, "To the bayonet, forward, enfants, get the tools."

And before the enemy had recovered from his stupefaction, our men are on the guns, which they get and bring back in a hurry under a storm of bullets and grenades.

When we are back from this sudden attack, we call the roll. Several fail to answer, and among them my friend of the day before.

I suffer as though he had been my own brother.

That night, when the storm of fire has ceased, we try to search carefully through the darkness of the terrain where our missing men have fallen. Groans tells us that they are there, but in their fever and pain no one answers our calls.

At daybreak, at the risk of the bullets which still whistle above the trench, we are able to see them.

There he was scarcely twenty yards away, his large eyes open and looking towards us . . . beyond us . . . very far. But I know where! ! !

The day begins quietly. Doubtless the enemy is meditating a revenge for yesterday's surprise; not a shot on our side or on the other. It is the silence after the storm. I begin to hope for a sudden attack which will let us go out and bring back our wounded.

A man brings the letters with our morning coffee. There was one for him and I call and tell him. He answers with a sigh. I guess rather than hear what he wants.

"Read me the letter, very loud so I can hear it." And in a voice which I force myself to make firm and almost joyous, while sobs choke me, I read this letter:

"My darling Papa:

"You did not expect a letter from me to-day for it's not my usual day. I wanted to surprise you. To-morrow is mamma's birthday. With the economies I made out of the allowance, I had my picture taken. I put on for the occasion her beautiful necklace and pretty red silk blouse which is so becoming to me. The neighbors already see how much I look like her.

"And that my little souvenir might be still more precious, I have copied on the back of the picture the song which you taught me when I was very small so that I could sing it before mamma's portrait.

"This song, now that you are no longer here, tells all that my heart would say to you on this day I long for you, mamma's birthday. It has become my evening prayer.

"'*Oh! si tu savais, loin de foi,*
Combien les heures sont amères,
Pleines d'attristantes chimères,
Et comme désert est le toit,

Va, j'ai beau remplir par l'étude
Et par le travail, tous mes jours,
C'est toi que je cherche toujours
Tout au fond de ma solitude.' "

Then, before I finished my reading, his voice continued the song of the child as he lay there on the point of death. In the hour of death his grave voice had a celestial accent; the simple song went up like a superhuman song, a seraphic song, above men, beyond all things. It penetrated to the bottom of our souls and probed our hearts and brought tears.

The barbarians on the other side of the trench, themselves fathers, husbands, brothers, understand that a father is dying calling to his child; that a past common to us all lives again in that last agony. And their arms rest inert, their guns are lowered, and all the fierce warriors remain motionless, dreaming, lost in the contemplation of their inner dreams. Alone, their hearts beat and bleed.

Suddenly someone shouts an oath from the German trench. A brute blasphemes,

" *Halt dein Maul.*"

A shot sounds. A bullet puts an end to that beatific agony.

Then, there was no need of a signal or an order. Tears dried spontaneously; rage bit our lips and lighted our eyes.

With a bound, with a single bound, sudden, violent, unanimous, we jumped the parapet, and without the enemy's firing a shot in his utter surprise, we bounded into the German trench. Five minutes later, there was none left alive.

Bowing my head over the body of my friend, I placed the picture of his child on his still moist lips.

The Communique will say:

" South of the Somme we took a picket post by surprise, captured two machine guns and considerable material for making asphyxiating gas. Our losses are insignificant."

And the public will think that very simple — a picket post . . . two machine guns . . . and no losses.

CHAPTER XIII

A NIGHT CONVOY

THE colonel just telephoned the following order:

"The echelons of the companies of machine guns will bring, to-night, thirty thousand cartridges to the P. C.[1] of the regiment. This order must be executed before daylight."

We spent the afternoon in verifying the belts and making up the war train.

Towards seven o'clock we went slowly towards the bridge at Froissy, where we made a long halt until night fell. The sentry refused to let us take the towpath which would save us some eight miles.

These were his instructions!

It appears that the noises of the caissons and wagons might wake up the enemy, who would at once bombard the towpath near which were numerous huts of regiments who were resting.

So we crossed the canal, and in order to get to

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[1] Commandant's Post.

Cappy on our right, we have to go round by Bray-sur-Somme.

But this road has its distractions.

The road is absolutely torn up and it is not five yards wide anywhere, in fact it is an infernal mixture of automobiles, artillery, caissons and batteries.

No one will slow up. They cross over, go around, hang on, shout, bellow, insult, and get past as best they can. Our mules are obstinate and stubborn and go on their way placidly in the midst of this uproar.

Once we lean so far to the right that the hubs of the wheels on the lower side stick in the mud.

We doubtless go ahead slowly, but we go ahead all the same. The drivers have to go in front of their beasts. It would be madness for them to stay on the seats of the ammunition wagons, and the certain ruin for man and beast, for exhausted by fatigue, they would fall asleep and get in the way of the enormous meteors which rush by without seeing anything.

As we approach Bray, the crowding is beyond anything one could imagine.

It is one compact mass of wagons, trucks, caissons, guns, forage wagons, all entangled, mixed up, wedged together, trying to get through a street scarcely wide enough to let two wagons by and where ten insist on going together.

If we mix with this crowd, we will condemn ourselves to several hours in one place without moving. Once in the crush it is impossible to get free and go back.

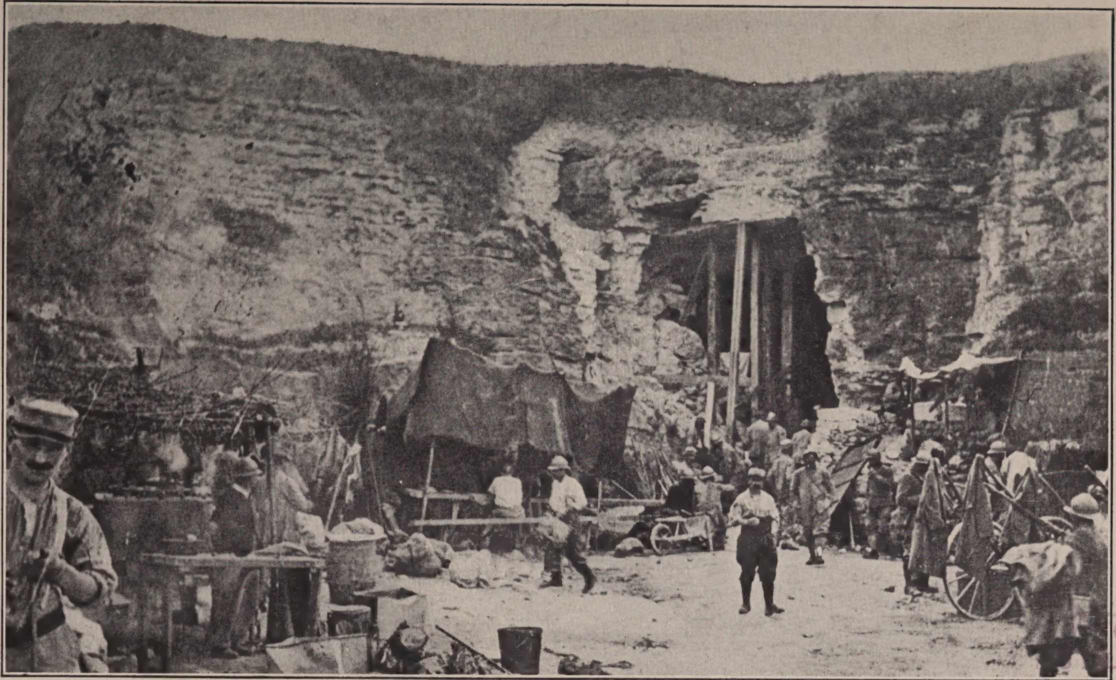
Roudon suggests that we twist around the village. Our wagons have the advantage of being able to go anywhere. They were made expressly for this work and have wide wheels and no frames.

We make a passage through a hawthorn hedge with a few blows of the axe and cross the fields in spite of the invectives of the gendarmes who persist in trying to make us circle round in regular order, just as though we were going around the Obelisk in the Place de la Concorde.

"Here, brave gendarmes, they pass as they can. Guns thunder. Shells are near, and it is necessary to arrive at the appointed time."

"Instructions thought out by some officer in the peace and quiet of a faraway office are all rot. Go on, you 'll find out."

We are beyond the village an hour later and



A Commandant's Post *See page 165*

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are on the highway which leads to the bridge at Cappy.

Here, things are askew again. We must cross to get over the bridge. We can't go around that. So we get into the string of wagons and follow their pace. They advance in skips and jumps . . . they go ahead ten yards, stop a quarter of an hour, and begin again. One would think he was in the line at the Opéra on the day of a free performance.

We stand about in one spot more than three hours.

Finally, about midnight we reach the entrance to the bridge.

A new delay!

We have to get out of the way to let convoys past which are going in the opposite direction. They are ammunition trucks which make a noise like thunder.

Just then, some artillerymen, who do not want to wait and who glory in the not altogether fortunate reputation of always getting by, no matter what 's in the way, dash on to the bridge at a gallop.

"That 's it. Now we 're in a pickle, a mess . . . that 's the . . ."

The poles run into the carburetors, the horses rear and kick against the hoods with their maddened hoofs; the motors continue to run, raging at their impotence.

Nevertheless a way must be cleared through the bridge. And in the pitch dark night that's not easy.

A chaffeur has the ingenious idea of lighting a headlight.

Immediately, evidently judging that this light is without a doubt insufficient and its aid is indispensable for us, the German artillery sends us all the material necessary for clearing the bridge.

It sends us shells and with absolutely no care at all.

To the right, to the left, in front, and behind, the shots fall like a hailstorm.

Cries, groans, oaths, and commands impossible to execute! It is Hell.

In an excess of generosity, doubtless to aid us in getting out of our difficulty, a well-aimed shell falls on a truck, sets fire to the gasoline tank, and the whole thing saturated with paint and covered with impervious canvas bursts into flames.

We can see. We can see only too well now, and the Boches too.

Through their glasses they can easily estimate what their objective is worth and see what a large crowd is crowding around the spectacle. And their bombardment doubles in intensity.

" This is no time to stay here."

On the trot we gain the fields and follow the bank lined by poplars.

We reach the limit of the zone of fire in about three hundred yards. We crowd behind the trees and hedges to avoid the splinters which can still reach us.

Suddenly, there is a terrible cry, a noise of something falling. The bridge has fallen down.

That is fatal.

" We 've got to be at the P. C. at daybreak, but I don't see how we are going to make it."

There is absolutely nothing to do just now; it would be folly to try anything, no matter what it was.

No matter what the cost these convoys must reach the left bank, where numerous units wait for the ammunition which they need badly, so the order is given to silence the enemy's batteries which are bombarding us so thoroughly.

All the guns in the valley of Froissy, including the big English guns, thunder out at once in an astounding uproar. . . .

The enemy returns the fire with a storm of shrapnel. But the trees with their thick leaves fortunately protect us from this. We hear splinters and bullets falling into the waters of the canal a few yards away.

The fire near the bridge continues. The flames have reached other vehicles now and a great cloud goes up in the air lighting up the surrounding country. No one even dares to think of trying to put it out in the thick rain of bullet and shell.

Roudon is disturbed. He is a man of duty, to whom an order is a sacred thing. No obstacle should prevent the execution of an order, so he proposes that we go back to Froissy and reach the P. C. of the regiment by way of the Cappy plateau.

" That 's mad, *mon vieux*. We 'd never make it before nine o'clock in the morning, and we 'd all be killed going that way in the open."

" So much the worse. It is necessary to bring the ammunition. It is an order and it is urgent."

" Wait a little while until this quiets down. They 'll not go on like this all night."

"Yes, they will too; they 've seen the convoys and they 'll keep up the barrage until daylight."

"If we could only find a boat. We could take the caissons to the other side. The quarry is n't far from there. The men could carry them."

"What are you thinking about? Going to find a boat at this time of night! And with what is falling into the canal we 'd run some risk in crossing. . . ."

Far from silencing the enemy, the fire of our batteries exasperates him.

Heavy guns, guns on tractors doubtless, have been brought into play. "280's" and "210's" come at regular intervals.

The Boches must have thought they had surprised a strategic movement much more important than it really was and were trying to check it.

The place is becoming untenable.

At the edge of the canal is a large stable for the canal horses, and a crowd of drivers, gunners, and cyclists have taken refuge there. It falls apart when a great shell strikes it. A terrible cry goes up and the building bursts into flames all over, like tow soaked in oil.

No one knows how many bodies are burned to cinders there. A frightful odor assails our nostrils in the smoke which encircles us.

A heavy rolling roar, boring through the night like the noise of an express train coming out of a tunnel at high speed, comes from over there, from the black hole where the enemy is.

" That 's a terrific fire! "

" Look out."

A violent puff, like a heavy blow, knocks us down.

The mules rear and draw back. A wagon slides down the bank and falls into the water, taking its animal and driver with it.

A shell has burst on the bank opposite and it has torn up by the roots a large poplar which falls across the canal. It is a miracle that it did n't crush a dozen of us. We run to help the driver. The water is shallow. He holds himself up by the weeds. We pull him out with the aid of several lengths of whip lash, but the mule and the wagon have rolled into the middle of the canal and are lost.

The bombardment continues until dawn, but less violently.

A few shots, the longest, come near us. The pounding continues on the site of the bridge, obstinately and stubbornly.

We are still there at the first rays of dawn.

" This is exasperating. We can never get these munitions to the P. C. before daylight."

" Say, Roudon, we have a bridge right in front of us. It will do."

And indeed the large poplar might let us get across the canal.

We try it.

We leave one man to guard the five wagons, and the rest detach the caissons from their supports, hang them on our shoulders, and one after another we try the chance bridge which bends a little but does not break.

Less than fifteen minutes later all the munitions are together on the opposite bank.

We reached the P. C. at five o'clock, exhausted without a doubt, but the order has been executed.

When the artillery officer saw us arriving, he started shouting,

" What do you want me to do with that? "

Roudon repeated the order he had received the day before.

“ So you have n't received the cancellation of the order? You always ought to wait for that. We were relieved last night. Take that stuff back where you got it from.”

We carried the caissons back to our wagons by the same way, by the same bridge.

Captain D . . . was coming along the tow-path and saw us arrive.

Roudon was furious as he told him about our useless adventure which might have cost us so dear.

He listened, laughed, then, coldly:

“ Bah! that will do the mules good. They 'll get used to marching at night. . . .”

CHAPTER XIV

THE SONGS OF THE HOMELAND

FONTAINE-LES-CAPPY is some hundred yards from the lines.

It is a reserve position to which the company was sent the day before in expectation of an attack which may come at any moment.

It is raining as it has n't stopped raining for weeks. We had floundered in the mud for five hours and were splashed by an endless string of convoys to get here from Villers where the regiment had scarcely begun a few short days of rest.

The men were tired out and threw themselves on the filthy straw. They have slept nearly all day, and this evening in groups they try their hardest to organize a respectable meal from the means at their disposal. The wine flows from full canteens, and flasks of cheap brandy come out of the packs.

The section leaders advise them to save some of their provisions for the next day.

"To-morrow! What do you think? To-morrow we'll lunch with the Boches. You! I'll pay you in sauerkraut."

Conversation gradually grew less amid the falling darkness and the smoke of pipes.

The silence became profound.

The men are not sleeping. They think and remember. Sadness and worry hover about. . . .

Far away, hesitating, a voice sings a prelude. But that voice is so pure and clear that it seems enormous, startling, vibrating in the dull numbness of men and things.

Vigne is humming a song of Provence, a hymn to the sun, which from the banks of the Durance to the shores of the Latin sea, from the blue hills of the Alps to the golden flowers of Vacarès, the youths and maidens of Avignon, Arles, and Maillamne sing as they return to the hospitable farm from their labors, their hands entwined for the farandole, with eyes full of smiles and love for the bright sun which makes them live and love.

Grand souleù de la Provènço
Gai coumpaire doù mistrau
Tu qu'escoules la Durènço
Comme un flot de vin de Crau,

Fai lusi toun blound caleù!
Coucho l'oumbro emai li fleù!
Leù! leù! leù!
Fai te vèire, beù souleu!

Vigne was sitting in a corner, elbows on his knees, chin between his hands, his face lifted, and singing unconsciously, his eyes on the distance.

A candle stuck in the neck of a bottle throws a flickering light on the damp ground of the cellar, and scarcely separates his outlines from the darkness.

Gradually one follows in, one after another, naturally, and they all begin to sing.

And music and rhythm form so large a part of their natures that they form a wonderful choir where the thirds and minors take form instinctively without an effort, and where the dream of their homeland marks the time.

And they sing from their souls, and through it all is the sun of their beautiful South, the poetry of their dawns, the charm of their twilights, the mystic gleams of the olives, the flight of the red flamingoes on the pools, the coming down of the shepherds from the perfumed hills, the mad career of the bulls in clouds of dust on the white roads of Camargue, the gold of the mimosas, the red of the wild poppies, the blue sky, the blue sea, the sun. . . .

Fai lusi . . .
Fai lusi toun blound caleù.

These soft voices, monotonous, hesitating a moment ago, which seemed scarcely awake, now sound out, vibrant, dashing, sonorous.

They are no longer uprooted exiles who are stirred; it is a force, a crowd, a people whom the song of their birthplace awakes, draws together, cheers. It is Provence herself that sings.

Outside, the cannon roar and the shells fall like hail around the cantonment. Great shells tear up the ground with their gigantic blows.

War, horrors, blood, ruins, fear, the attack which is near at hand, death perhaps, all that exists no longer for them. It is all of no consequence to them; the air of their natal song transports them.

These men shut up in dark cellars, in dugouts, shaken by the terrific hammering of shells, are transported by their dream to the bright sunshine, the bright and cheerful atmosphere of their southern plains. They sing, and at once they are living again the life of their homeland.

Their "little" country dominates them and makes them valiant and strong in the midst of the sorrows all about to attack and stand up in defense of the Great! . . .

I go out with my nerves on edge and my eyes full of tears before the unearthly beauty of the scene.

Streaks of light from the stuffed airholes alone let me realize that men in large numbers wait there underground for a signal to dash into the fiery furnace. . . .

I walk to the end of the village to the officers' quarters to calm my nerves.

Voices still rise in song on both sides of the road. There, under my feet in a ruin — so martyred that one might think it was an acropolis raising prayers of stone to heaven — a chorus of warm voices scans the joyous song,

Qué cantès, qué recantès
Cantès pas per iev,
Cantès per ma mia
Qu'es auprès de iev.

Here are the lads of Languedoc, Nîmes, Montpellier, the vine growers of the plains, the carters of Aiguesmortes, the harvesters of Toulouse all carried away by the evocation of their homeland.

Oh! the beautiful song! How it puts heart into one; more beautiful than the most martial hymn composed in the harsh technique of the ink pots.

It is the living expression, simple, spontaneous, natural, of the people, the family and the soil. It carries in it the remembrances of happy childhood, of loves bathed in sunshine, the radiant nuptials in the mystery of light and flowers. It speaks of the loved pastures, the paternal roof, the farm, the herds, the vines . . . and that is the Patrie.

Oh! the beautiful song! It dissipates dark thoughts, fears, uncertainties; it makes lovers and heroes, electrifies them, and increases their strength a hundred fold. They are the lads of Provence and Languedoc who spread through the world the triumphal "Marseillaise." They are the same lads who despite the mud and the dark night breathe in their memory and in the song the re-vivifying breath of their "little" country, who in pursuit of the routed enemy make the "Marseillaise" victorious again, victorious alway.

At the end of the village in a house at the side of the road to Chuignolles, a feeble light filters through the canvas which takes the place of shutters.

The officers are quartered here. Lieutenant Casanova is stretched out on a mattress on the ground, smoking and dreaming over his eternal cigarette. Lieutenant Delpos leaning on a box which serves him for a table, is reading, by the light of a lantern, an illustrated novel.

I look over his shoulder. They are rather sprightly, suggestive illustrations, reinforced with a vengeance by the fervid imagination and second-hand talent of the readers who have handed it around.

The wind and rain rage outside the window. Poor weather for an attack.

" I 'm sure that we 've come here for nothing."

" Oh, that can be launched at any time."

" I should be much surprised if it came this evening."

" Listen."

A heavy, faraway, continuous rumble, like the beating of a drum, is heard just then.

The sound seems to come from the direction of Lihons and to get nearer by degrees.

In the midst of the fusillade we hear distinctly the regular crackle of the machine guns.

Suddenly, a terrific fire breaks out opposite us. D . . . company, which we are to support, must have gone into action.

" That 's getting close."

We go out. The road forms a sort of embankment at this spot, which is forbidden during the daytime, and from which we look toward the lines.

A great light has risen. More and more frequent bursts of shrapnel at this distance have the effect of immense red Venetian lanterns, tossed about by the wind in the dark night.

Rockets go up suddenly on our right.

That is a call for the artillery. The expected attack is probably taking place over there. We have been placed in reserve for fear that the attack might widen out on the sector, but it is probable that we shall not have to intervene.

" It looks as though it were quieting down there in front."

" Hum! You 'll see."

Lieutenant Casanova has had great experience in battles, and he is n't taken by surprise by apparent lulls. On the contrary. Silence is what he dreads most.

"You 'll see."

And as a matter of fact we did n't have long to wait. . . . A tornado of shells falls between the lines and our cantonment. This is immediately followed by another, then still another, all in a couple of minutes.

It is a barrage of "77's," effected by a battery which has taken us in its fire.

"I certainly think that something is going to happen."

"Go and tell the section leaders to get their men together and to have them ready."

I go into the night in search of the cantonment.

All the men are awake. The corporals and sergeants have foreseen the order and everyone is waiting.

The shells and the fire of our rifles and our machine guns is only one frightful uproar in which all noises are confounded.

As I return toward the officers badly aimed spent machine-gun bullets whistle in the trees above.

" All we can do is to wait. If they need us, they 'll call us."

As he said this the ever-imperturbable Lieutenant Casanova went back into his quarters and we followed him.

" I suggest poker," said Delpos. " I 'll go and find the cards."

" Three-handed poker is too risky."

" Well, here 's a fourth."

Someone raised the canvas which served as a door.

It 's an intelligence officer from the colonel.

" Lieutenant, D . . . company is running out of munitions. Pass yours to them and send back for new supplies. Here 's the order."

The lieutenant read the order and said:

" All right. It will be done."

Hardly twenty minutes later, ten men from each section, each carrying four caissons, were assembled on the way out of the village.

D . . . company's position, which we marked yesterday, is about six hundred yards away and some yards beyond the ridge of the plateau between the main road from Amiens and the Somme. There 's little chance of losing the way, for it is downhill. We might pass through the fields but thirty yards before reaching the trench the ground is literally swept with shells. It is impossible to use the communication trench. The enemy artillery has located it mathematically and has completely destroyed it. The shells fall there without a let-up. The least dangerous passage is the unprotected ground.

Stretched out in the mud, the head of one against the heels of the other, our men form an endless chain on the terrain which extends from the sheltered ridge to the fire trench. They pass along the caissons by a simple movement of the arms, without raising their bodies or their heads.

In the same way and by the same means, crawling along, I reach the trenches in my turn and fall in.

Captain D . . . is there, striding from one gun to another, encouraging his men and hurrying their fire.

" I was sure that I was going to run out of ammunition. They were already within one hundred and fifty yards."

"We 've passed you one hundred and sixty caissons. We 've sent men for more and they 'll be here in half an hour."

"We don't need any more. It 's all over. Their attempt is broken. By daylight we 'll see more than two hundred bodies in front of our barbed wire. You can go. I thank you. Take my regards and thanks to Lieutenant Casanova."

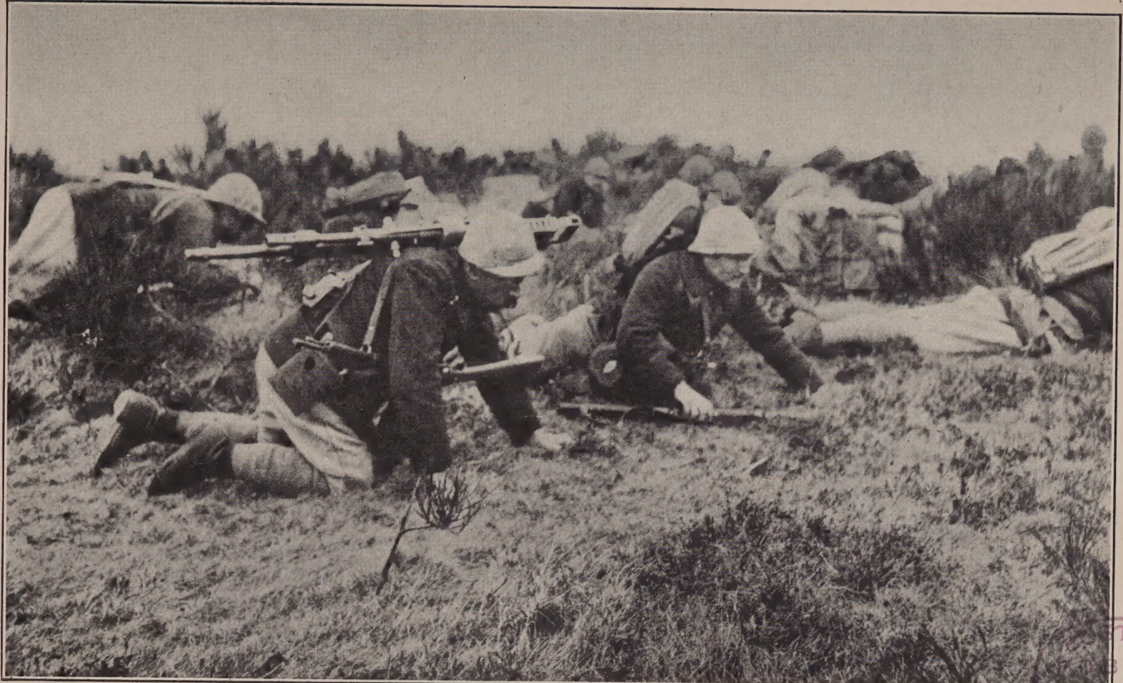
The firing continued all night, sometimes intermittently, sometimes in violent salvos, so that one might imagine that the enemy was making another attack.

At dawn we only heard rare, isolated detonations.

Our men returned to the cantonment uninjured. There were a few scratches and slight wounds in the hands, but there was no discharge in sight.

Some of them had had narrow escapes. Bullets had ricochetted and gone through the steel helmets. Linari's was perforated with a round, well-defined hole. The bullet had gone out close to the ear.

They were exhausted by lack of sleep, and after eating a meal hastily thrown together from the



The least dangerous Passage Is the unprotected Ground *See page* 185

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things at hand, they started for their underground shelters.

Just then the sun rose shining brightly.

In the sky, washed by weeks of rain, it was so clear and smiling with warmth that one would have thought it was a sunrise in the South.

"Say, this morning that 's the sun of the South!"

"What 's it doing here? It 's made a mistake."

"Beautiful sun! Indeed, there 's only you."

And in the pure morning air, these peasants of Provence saluted the rising sun by shouting the joyous song which, a few hours before, had brightened their night.

Gran souleù de la Prouvènço
Fai lusi toun blound caleù.

The attack was heavy; it is over. They have come back from it. They are still alive. We must begin all over again, to-night, perhaps; possibly this evening; perhaps in an hour. Death lurks everywhere. What difference does it make? This morning the sun rose radiantly. They sing!

CHAPTER XV

A WATER PATROL

FOR several days the Germans had been at work making changes opposite our salient on the banks of the Somme. Probably it was a machine-gun emplacement to prevent any attempt at attack from that side. But as there must be no obstacle in the way of our next advance, the major, after talking with the colonel, sent for Lieutenant Delpos, who was in charge of the section in that sector and asked him what he thought of the work.

" It 's hard to say," he answered. " If they 've brought two or three machine guns it will be humanly impossible even to try to advance. It all depends on the importance of the work. We can't tell from here what it is."

" Our aeroplane observations and photographs don't tell us anything," said the major. " The view is partly cut off by the tops of the trees along the river."

"Aeroplane observations are n't everything," answered Delpos.

"But I can't send a patrol over such unprotected ground. It would be utterly wiped out before it discovered anything."

"Will you give me an order," asked Delpos, "to make a reconnaissance in whatever way I think best? In twenty-four hours, at the latest, I think I can bring you the exact details."

"Go ahead. Do your best. I 'll send you a written order to cover it."

When he got back to his post, Lieutenant Delpos examined the strip of terrain as thoroughly as he could by peering over the top of the parapet, and then asked for the photographs the aeroplanes had taken. Finally, he studied the map of the country which the enemy occupied opposite us. Then, he went to Éclusier, borrowed a boat, and stayed out in the current calculating its direction by bunches of grass pulled from the banks.

He came back to the company towards noon and sent me to the echelon for Gondran, whom I brought back about three o'clock. At seven Delpos had his plans made. He went to the major, who received him at once, and explained the project he wanted to put into execution that evening.

Delpos asked him, as it would probably be useful in distracting attention, to have the sections at the extreme north of the sector fire several heavy volleys between eleven o'clock and midnight.

When this was arranged, everything was ready for his departure and he invited me to dinner as he ordinarily did. His dinners were always good and there was excellent wine which his servant had managed to find in the ruins of Harbonnière and Villers.

As he was lighting his cigar after the dessert, he said:

" We 're going to pay a call on the Boches this evening. The chances of staying there are about even, but, in any case, even if we remain, the performance won't be uninteresting. It will be as good as a first night at the 'Grand-Guignol!' Take your revolver, some grenades and come along."

I would have been highly unappreciative to have refused such a kind invitation, although adventure, to say nothing of such a mad adventure, has never been to my taste. But Lieutenant Delpos had the reputation of always getting out, so why should n't he get out this time.

Gondran was waiting for us a little ways from Éclusier, in a small creek, hidden under the trees.

Gondran and his boat!

It was one of those flat-bottomed, square-ended boats that fishermen use to cross marshes where the water is shallow. He had covered it with a camouflage of grass, weeds, and moss so that even close to it was impossible to tell it from one of the thousand little islands which obstruct the Somme at this point.

We slipped into the boat and stretched out at once — it would n't have held us in any other way — and waited for total darkness. When it came, Gondran began to push the boat ahead. He was used to fishing for eels with a spear in the clear waters of the canals and knew how to move silently, without a splash, almost without making a ripple on the surface of the water. If our course had not been against the current, we might have been mistaken for a pile of drifting grass.

Flat on his stomach in the stern with both arms in the water up to his elbows and a stick of wood in each hand, slowly and silently he paddled like a duck.

The officer and I were both flat also, in the bow, and we peered into the darkness. I held a string in one hand, and the other end was tied around Gondran's arm. We had arranged that one pull meant to stop and stay where we were; two to go back.

We went on without accident for nearly two hours. Suddenly, a bump, a hard jolt, fortunately without any noise besides the rustling of the weeds. The night was so thick that it was impossible to tell what the obstacle was, whether it was the bank or an island. We tried in vain to see through the fathomless darkness. We ventured to feel about with our hands, and, in the middle of the weeds and reeds, I was gripped by something. I pulled back my arm, in a hurry, to get away. A sharp point cut the skin, then another, and I felt a scratch from my elbow to my fist.

I whispered in Delpos's ear, " Barbed wire."

A network of barbed wire barred the river here. The Germans had foreseen the possibilities of an approach and had taken precautions to prevent it. Was the network large, or was there only a single barrier, that was the question. Or, should we go back? In any case there was no use in re-appearing before we were expected, for we had reached their lines.

Since the work under suspicion was a little in advance of their first trench, we must be nearly even with it. We had brought wire cutters, but what was the use of cutting the first net, if we were to find another beyond it, and then another, and so on for fifty or a hundred yards perhaps.

The enemy is meticulous in his defenses and spares no means of protecting himself. It was also a question whether we were in the middle of the river or near the bank. By shoving his paddle down at arm's length Gondran touched bottom. So we were going to reach the bank, but first we must prepare for our retreat. Using the barbed wire as a guide, we put the boat out into the middle of the river, but not in the strength of the current, and then on a stick we had brought along set up a dummy dressed in the uniform of one of the Colonials. Then we went back to the bank.

Here was the most ticklish and dangerous moment of our mission. What, we asked ourselves, was the shape of the bank and would we find a sentinel? We brought the boat as near the shore as possible and in as far as we could. By feeling to the right we could touch solid ground. The time had come! . . . We glided from the boat like snakes and once on land remained motionless, holding our breaths. It was impossible to see anything a yard off; there was no noise except the far-off rumbling of the guns in the English sector. We went ahead. . . . The heavy socks we had drawn over our boots deadened our steps. The damp grass bent but did not crackle.

"Conrad! Come here. It is time."

"What time?"

"Nearly midnight."

"Good."

"The lieutenant is n't here."

"No?"

"He is with the major and will come back."

"Come along."

"But there 's no one here."

"What of it? Come along."

This conversation in German stopped us short. The voices seemed to come from the ground two steps in front of us. Doubtless there was a sap there. . . . We heard steps getting farther away. I grabbed the officer and making a megaphone of my hands whispered in his ear what I had just understood from their conversation. In the same way, he responded:

"Inviting you was an inspiration. Since they 've gone, we can get in there."

A few steps beyond in the open ground a feeble light filtered through sacks hung as shutters. It was the sap! . . . We stretched out on the ground and tried to see inside. There was no one standing, but if anyone was left he must be asleep, and we could surprise him. . . . We jumped in. Not a soul. Without a doubt it was a post momentarily empty during a relief. On some overturned chairs there was a platter with a candle on it and we put it out. We examined the place with our flashlight. A communication trench opened into the post and we started down.

No matter where it led or whether we could retrace our steps or not, the die was cast. The number of chances of our getting back alive which Delpos had said were even seemed to me to have grown beautifully less. The trench stopped short within ten yards. Ahead, to the right, to the left, we stuck our noses into the solid wall. But the men had got out someway. . . .

Delpos risked another flash of his light — the way out was over our heads. It was a shaft with a ladder leading up it. We heard someone talking above. The relief was coming down. . . .

Just then the noise of firing came from our own lines. The sections were firing as had been arranged. This wise precaution served beyond our utmost expectations, for above us began at once the rapid tac-tac of the machine guns and we heard commands.

So the shaft led into the machine-gun emplacement. That was just what we wanted to know; our reconnaissance was at an end.

Delpos drove a cheddite bomb into the wall beneath the ladder, and I tied a slow fuse to it. We jumped towards the river. I lighted the fuse as I jumped from the sap, just as an immense body appeared in the opening and blocked the way.

"*Wer da?*"

"'*Wer da?*' you'll find out who is there," Delpos muttered, and with a blow full on the chest, while I threw myself on his legs, we got the colossus down, as he shouted for help.

But the firing drowned his cries.

Then, to deprive him of all interest in keeping on, I applied my revolver to his forehead, and Delpos kicked him under the chin. We left him senseless and voiceless for at least a quarter of an hour.

We jumped into our boat and slid under the camouflage. Whether we had made too much noise or a sentinel had heard us, I don't know, but we were hardly there, and were just pushing off, when shots came in our direction, star shells lighted the river, and men ran up and down the bank.

We heard them cry, "There he is . . . there. . . ." They had seen our dummy in the middle of the river and were firing at him with rifles and bombarding him with grenades. We did not move. By stretching out an arm we could almost have touched the legs of the men who came down to the water's edge to hurl their grenades. None of them dreamed we were so near.

The alarm lasted about twenty seconds; it seemed like a century.

We knew that the blockhouse was going to blow up and we wanted to be far away for the débris were likely to reach us and crush us.

Suddenly, terribly, came the explosion.

It was fortunate for us that the alarm had held us close to the bank. Whole blocks of granite were hurled into the middle of the river just where we would have been. We were too near and too low and everything went over us.

The violence of the waves tore us from the bank and drove us into the strength of the current, and we were n't fired on once. The whole garrison had been blown up.

At daybreak, three o'clock in the morning, Lieutenant Delpos woke up the major.

" Major," he said, " it was a machine-gun emplacement. But it is no more. If you will allow me, I 'm going to bed. I could n't get any sleep over there; there was too much noise.

CHAPTER XVI

A COMMANDER

AT the beginning of June, the colonel's report informed us that the major of Battalion C . . . had been assigned to the . . . first Colonials.

The battalion commandant's post was next to ours on the ridge of the quarry.

Since the departure of Major L . . . the captain adjutant-major, who was assuming the command in the interim, was quartered there. He was devoting himself to his ablutions in the open place in front of his dugout and at the same time telling Lieutenants C . . . and D . . ., his neighbors, an uproarious adventure of his last leave, when a man, tall and spare, with hollowed cheeks, sunburned skin, eyes deep and shining, modestly dressed, — a mechanic's blue trousers, badly fitting and muddy boots, regulation trooper's jacket, with no mark to show his rank, — came out of the sort of tunnel in which the La Vache trench ended, and stopped as if undecided, in front of our dugouts.

There was a mounted scout there who was occupying himself in cutting out a ring, and he asked him,

"The post of the major of the . . . first battalion?"

Without stopping his work, the man indicated our group with his hand. He advanced shyly.

"The . . . first battalion?"

"This is it," said the adjutant-major, drawing his wet head from the canvas bucket in which he was plunging.

"I am Major C . . ."

"Oh, Major, I beg your pardon. I did n't know . . ." mopping his face rapidly, and putting on his tunic which his orderly handed to him.

Without a word, the unperturbed figure, Major C . . ., looked off into the distance, beyond material things, waited for him to finish his toilet, and then entered into the P. C. to take possession of his new post.

None of us who lived constantly in his immedate neighborhood ever knew any other expression on his firm, cold, almost mystical face. His hair was poorly cut, his beard was thin and long, and his voice was gentle, very gentle, so gentle that one might call it a sad sing-song. All in all he had none of the outward appearance of the conventional commander.

Nevertheless he was one of the best.

Good reputations, they say, take longest to establish. Only legends come to life spontaneously. His kindliness and honesty must have belonged to the legends, because in less than a week there was not a single man in the battalion who did not speak of him with respect and admiration.

" He 's a chic type," they said.

" He 's a man."

And the men, who love to see their commander among them, living their life, sharing their labors and fatigue, experiencing the same trials, knew at once that he did not belong to that distant and unknown hierarchy which transmits its orders from an ivory throne.

From the day he took over his command, he wanted to see everything for himself and all the positions in the sector.

With his knotty baton in his hand, he went through all the communication trenches, the first-line trenches, into the saps, verified the riflemen's posts, and, it was said, spent nights in the picket posts.

When the battalion relieved the 38th at Méharicourt, the commandant's post which was assigned to the major was in an immense house in the middle of a park which was not much destroyed.

Since the day before, however, the artillery had established an observation tower in a poplar and had foreseen that it would hardly be prudent to occupy the house. It would be shelled if the battery were spotted.

The commander learned this, and without saying a word established his things all the same in the salon which he used for an office and bedroom.

The first night and the next morning passed without incident — not a single shot from the Boche lines. Aeroplanes flew over at daybreak.

He had invited to lunch, as was his custom, when we were in cantonment, the doctor, his captain adjutant-major, and the engineer officer in charge of the sector.

My relations with him dated back before the war, so I was with him often, and he frequently kept me at the table with his guests. I was there that day.

We had scarcely sat down when they began to talk of Portugal's entrance into the war. The engineer was the manager of a political paper and his remarks were so keen that we were all interested, and even the servants stopped to listen.

Just then a shell, the first in two days, burst somewhere in the neighborhood. The glasses rattled on the table; we could hear things falling, and people running by in the street.

The conversation stopped.

The major, who had been as silent as usual during the meal, spoke up in his quiet voice:

"They say that their artillery is excellent . . . it comes from Creusit" — and he engaged the journalist in a historical discussion about the armament and strength of Portugal, which showed a deep knowledge of the country, in spite of its unexpected and recent entrance into the ranks of the Allies.

The journalist seemed to take a lively interest in this conversation which he had started, but he instinctively turned his eyes to the windows every time a shell burst, for now explosions far and near, the screeching of shells and the falling of walls indicated clearly that we were the center of a bombardment.

At each explosion the doctor looked at the adjutant-major, who kept on eating quietly, as if to say, "Are you going to stay here much longer?"

The explosions came nearer and all around us. We could see plainly the bits of steel which whistled by the windows, grazing the walls which they destroyed. We could hear the plaster falling down the staircase.

As the servant brought the desserts — a Camembert, crackers, fruit, and white wine — a violent explosion of a new arrival nearby tore the window, stuffed with paper, from its hinges and the draught of air half overturned the orderly who let the platter fall on the table, to the great damage of the tablecloth where the white wine ran out. . . .

"*Bigre!*" said the major.

"I think it 's time to get into the cellar."

The engineer was only waiting for this invitation to stop the conversation and was half out of his chair when the major took his arm and sat him down again.

"In short, Portugal owed its title of Historical Conquistador to its navy."

And he began to relate the records of that valorous nation on the sea from the time these people on the Tagus served in the Carthaginian triremes to Vasco da Gama, Magellan, Cabral, Bartholomew Diaz. Never was conversation more polished, imaginative, and undisturbed.

A terrific explosion shook the house; part of the roof rolled down the staircase; the cook and the waiter jumped into the hall.

"Well, what is it?"

"Major, it fell in the garden, ten feet from the kitchen."

"The gentlemen are waiting for their coffee. Bring it."

The doctor could stand no more, alleged that perhaps there were wounded waiting for him at the dressing station, and asked permission to withdraw.

The servants brought in the boiling coffee in a hurry, and he got up to go, as the commander said:

" We 'll go along with you. We 'll see whether the shells have done much damage in the cantonment."

" But, Commander, do you think it 's prudent to venture out in the streets just now? "

" It 's my opinion, gentlemen, that the Germans, who obviously wanted to furnish the music for our meal, should know that we 've finished " — and he lighted his cigar and went out on the steps.

The neighborhood was badly shattered indeed. Large holes blocked the street; the artillery observatory had been hit by a well-aimed shell, had fallen on a shed and crushed it. Immense craters had appeared here and there in the garden and the whole front of the house was splashed with steel.

The enemy's fire was letting up; it had almost ceased.

Heads now appeared at the air-holes of the cellars trying to see what had happened.

We followed the commander along the main street which led to the dressing post. An aeroplane in the azure sky, a small silver bird shining in the sun, went on its giddy way.

With our noses in the air, we watched it pass. The whistle of a shell approached with a noise like a panting locomotive.

"There 's the last."

A frightful crash, a cloud of greenish smoke, bricks and timbers fall . . . cries . . .

The villa we had just left re-appeared with a large yawning hole, its walls burning and fallen apart. The last shell had fallen into the dining room!

His courage and coolness were not calculated or put on; they were not an effort of the will. They were natural.

He was a fatalist like all who have lived long in Eastern countries. What he had above all was a powerful control of himself and a sovereign contempt for danger.

He had an absolutely definite conviction that he would be killed in the next attack. He had so thoroughly accustomed himself to the idea that as a result he had made all arrangements and now awaited the hour, in the meanwhile doing his duty as a commander honorably and simply.

One evening I went to greet him at his cantonment at Froissy — he was going on leave the next day — I asked him, among other things, if it would be agreeable to him, if I used his horses while he was gone.

" My horses? I have no further use for them. They can't follow me through the trenches and barbed wire — to the front; coming back . . . they 'll bring me in a canvas. They 'll serve my successor."

It would have been perfectly useless to protest.

After a moment of silence when he seemed to be keenly interested in the ripples of the water in the canal, he went on:

" I 'm going on leave to-morrow, to bid good-by to mine. That will be the last. What are you doing this evening? "

" Nothing, Commander."

" Do you want to make a tour of the sector with me? "

" At your orders, Commander."

By the last red rays of the sun setting on the heights to the north of the Somme, we reached the lines through the open path which passed by the camp kitchens and reached the hill of the Château de Cappy.

Twilight passed, followed by the most varied colors.

The red sun as it plunged behind the black poplars on the wide horizon flooded the sky with a great yellow light, fiery, burning yellow, like the gold of flames which gradually grew thin and pale, and became light like an immense head of hair.

A little later mauve and violet precursors of approaching clouds passed slowly from pale to dark to end in night.

The clear moon came up above the plateau of the road from Amiens. We walked on, one behind the other, in silence.

He stopped to look at the sky and I heard him murmur, " How beautiful it is."

This twilight must have recalled to him the skies of the Orient.

" Yes, the sunsets on the sea, in the Indies, in the Red Sea. I am homesick for the light and the sea. The light, the sea, the woman; the greatest joys, the greatest sorrows!!!"

He fell into his revery again.

We reached the orchard above the great quarry, and an outlying picket warned us that the path was dangerous.

The commander did not even hear him and continued to walk on the road from Herbècourt, bordered by apple trees in blossom.

"Ta-co!"

A German bullet tore through the night, and a broken branch with its white petals fell at our feet.

He picked it up and looked at it a long time; plucked a blossom and put it in his pocket,

"Even the flowers!"

He said nothing more that evening. We went through the front lines of the sector until late at night, stopping at the loopholes to observe the enemy's position and questioning the sentries.

We got back to Froissy at three o'clock in the morning, and at six he went to the station at Guillaucourt and left on his leave.

When he got back, the attack, they said, was near; they were preparing for it seriously. He did not give up attending to the slightest details of the battalion. He showed a paternal interest in his men, knew the men of all ranks by their names, and stopped those he met and talked to them familiarly.

The battalion followed the deep path to the entrance of the "120 long" to get back to its positions. A wooden bridge had been constructed here by the artillery to get their guns across. This was useless now and made the road so narrow that the column had to dress back and form by twos. This long manœuvre compelled the men to mark time in one spot.

There is nothing especially disagreeable about marking time for we have seen many other stops for less reasons, but this evening the Boche artillery had information of the arrival of the attacking regiment in the lines and was shelling heavily all possible ways of access.

A single "77" falling into this crowd of men would make a hecatomb.

The commander was marching at the head of the column followed by the intelligence officers of the companies.

He stopped a moment in front of the bridge encircled by the explosions of the shells.

" If a shell would only destroy it! "

But as if for spite, they fell all around and missed it.

" It must be destroyed."

There was nothing formal about this order, and the task was n't easy.

He took off his belts, gave his jacket to a man, and with his chest bare the commander stood up on the bridge, propped himself on the timbers of the floor, and began to tear them up.

Ten men imitated him of their own accord. They finished tearing it down amidst a storm of shells which raged about, and in the black smoke of the explosions in which they disappeared for minutes at a time.

In a quarter of an hour the way was clear; all that was left was the two laterals which were planted in the walls of the covered path.

The battalion was engulfed in the whirlpool and passed without loss.

The commander stood on the pile of materials and watched the men file past. He was the last one over.

When we reached the line, he began to walk up and down incessantly.

The fire of our batteries had been uninterrupted for three days; and this with the constant whizzing of shells as they passed over our heads put our nerves almost as much on edge as the strain of the approaching attack.

Towards eleven o'clock one night there was an intense calm all of a sudden.

The firing ceased along the whole line — on both sides. All was silence, but it was the silence which precedes the storm, the stupor of nature after the flash and before the thunder.

The men burrowed in the saps and fell asleep. The sentries who had not closed an eye for forty-eight hours continued to fight against sleep.

It was almost impossible to recognize the commander in his bizarre garb, wrapped in a canvas instead of a waterproof, his steel helmet covered with mud, as he wandered up and down the trenches, with a kind word of encouragement for each one.

In the " Servian " trench there was an exposed passage to the German lines. They had blocked this up by piles of sandbags, chevaux de frise, and rolls of barbed wire.

As a greater precaution, a sentry was stationed there night and day. He was sleeping deeply when the commander came by. He had to shake him vigorously to wake him up.

"Say, do you sleep like that when you 're sentry?"

"I . . . it 's true . . . I was asleep."

"That 's not serious. Try hard, if an officer should come along, you 'd not get off with advice."

"They won't come along; they 're all snoozing in their dugouts."

"Oh, you never know."

"Well, I 'm going mad sooner or later. I have n't slept a wink for three nights. If the Boches are as tired as I am they won't come to wake us up."

As he talked, his voice was drawn out more and more and his head nodded. He was dead with sleep . . .

The commander took his rifle from his hands and said:

"I 'm not sleepy, and, besides, I shall sleep very well to-morrow. I 'll mount guard to-morrow. Sleep, little one, sleep. We, the old, have lost our habit of sleep."

The sentry did not even acquiesce in this invitation. He had accepted it in advance, for he was asleep already.

At daybreak when the relief came, the sergeant who accompanied the new sentry was thunderstruck when he recognized the commander mounting guard at the loophole.

“Here ’s his rifle. Wake him up when I have gone. Say nothing about it, for he was very sleepy.”

When the signal for the assault was given the next day, after our first two waves had gained the enemy trenches without firing a shot, the commander, who was to go with the third, had scarcely advanced on the field when the whistle of a single shell shattered the air.

A “77” burst and a cloud of smoke went up. His thigh was torn off and we saw him fall in a pool of blood.

Lieutenant Delpos was getting ready to dash across with the second section of the company and he jumped towards him.

“Go on, my friend, the end has come. I am waiting for it. Tell Captain C . . . to take command of the battalion.”

And during the slow agony which lasted a half hour he did not stop following attentively the progress of his men on the conquered positions.

Stretcher-bearers carried his body to the church in Éclusier.

We buried him simply on the hill at the east of Cappy in a military cemetery near the canal.

When the news of his death was known in the battalion, I know more than a hundred who had seen their best comrades fall beside them, who wept as though they had lost their fathers. . . .

He was with us only a month.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ATTACK

WE had been talking about it for months. The hour of the great attack has finally come.

They have been preparing for it ever since we were transformed into diggers and sapers who dug trenches, parallels, communication trenches, and saps, day and night.

It 's going to succeed at last.

This time the artillery preparation won't be insufficient.

We have guns, little and big, of every kind, of every caliber, from the little howitzers set low on their plates with their large muzzles like those we used to see on the terrace of the Invalides up to the great naval guns, long, lean and sharp, like a cigar, monumental guns of unheard-of size mounted on gigantic platforms, with covered turrets, new and odd foreign cannon, long as a train and mounted on rails.

And there are projectiles such as the wildest imagination could not dream of. Whole fields of shells of every caliber from the small "75" which now seem like playthings to the enormous "400's" which can be moved only by gigantic jacks.

And over this immense sea of shells they have stretched a green colored tarpaulin, dotted with great yellow spots, with great chalky streaks which in the distance give them the appearance of a field furrowed by tracks.

We have been encamped in a wood for three days under tents beside batteries of heavy artillery waiting for the order to take up our positions for the attack.

And for these three days our constant occupation has been to strengthen and set up our huts again, for every shot from the great neighboring gun drags them from the ground by the tremendous displacement of air.

That is all right in the daytime. This Penelope-like work relieves the monotony and serves as a counter irritant to nervousness. But the occupation is less interesting at night.

Finally, about nine o'clock one evening, a great uproar arose in the companies on the other side from us and by degrees, like a rising sea, reached us — we are in our usual place at the extreme wing of the battalion.

The adjutant had advanced to meet the news and he came back on the run.

" It 's come this time. They are distributing the playthings to clear the trenches and they 're going to give out an additional cup of brandy."

" Do you believe it will be before to-morrow morning? "

" Do I believe it. It 's sure, by God! Perhaps you want them to wait until next winter! "

" No, but you know. There have been so many orders and counter-orders that one can never be sure. It ought to rain."

" Do you think it will rain? "

" Good God! I wish it would. The sooner we finish the performance, the sooner we 'll get to bed."

The colonel's orderly arrives with the orders:

" The Casanova company of machine guns will support the second battalion and will take the designated objective (Hill 707) directly after the third wave."

" The third wave! Hum! That 's not good. The first wave is a promenade, nothing in front. The second goes over then, but the third has all the shells, for it 's right in the barrage."

" And after? "

" After? "

" Say, you must think you 're in a café at La Cannebière. Perhaps you 'd like to order an ice. This is war, you know."

" I see it now."

The distributions are finished at ten o'clock and we move towards our positions behind the second battalion.

The men have taken off their belts and all their useless equipment and are in jackets with their tent canvas crosswise.

The diluvial rain which has been falling for some days has stopped this evening. The sky is as black as ink and we can't see a yard in front of us.

The paths were already muddy, but now they have disappeared after whole regiments have gone towards the lines without interruption for some hours. When we reach the communication trench it is no longer a trench at all, but a stream of fluid mud, where we sink over our leggings. We have to use our hands to pull out our legs when they get stuck.

" Well, *mon vieux,* if we have to go clear to Berlin at this pace, we won't get there before tomorrow morning! . . ."

It is so dark that we can scarcely see the back of the comrade in front of us. We march in silence, with our hands on the sheaths of the bayonet and our mask case to prevent the metal striking against the sides of the trench.

It is after two o'clock when we reach the lines. We take our places as best we can, where we can, and with what we can find.

The saps are filled with companies in reserve who will guard the trench while we fight.

We find places against the sides of the trench, in chance dugouts gashed in the parapet. We have to be careful to keep our feet underneath us to avoid having our toes crushed in the incessant coming and going to and fro.

Rifts in the clouds show us that the sky is clearing. It will be fine.

We talk. We weigh optimistically our chances of success. But we have to shout into each other's ears or we could n't hear anything. Above us is the infernal roar of an incessant bombardment.

Our guns have fired some days without interruption. And the men never cease praising the heavy artillery. We have never been supported in this way. How far we are from the days in Champagne! We have confidence, absolute confidence.

Day comes. The sun rises, the bright clear sun, which will be warm soon, rises over the ridge behind us. On the broad, many-colored screen of the sky with its rays of dawning day, the chimney of the distillery at Frameville, still intact and standing as though hurling defiance at the Germans, stands out monumental and black like a gigantic obelisk.

The countryside never stood out so clearly. I note the slightest details with a feeling which can never be effaced. I continue to look persistently to overcome my nervousness and to have something else to think about.

I look . . .

Below, in advance, are light lines of freshly turned earth. They are the German trenches, and I think I can see among the apparent ruins the invisible loopholes ready to belch forth death. A little further to the left, a few yards from the sides of the cliff is a small clump of woods which seems quiet and deserted. Our shells have started fires, but the fortified positions which conceal the machine guns are still there.

I look . . .

The ground and slope in front of me, close to the parapet, is empty, bare, torn full of shell holes. Young trees have been cut down, and the fallen trees are rotting in the earth under the growing moss. But daisies, buttercups, wild poppies, and cornflowers have sprung up and blossomed, opening out to nature, the sun, and life.

All the fires will shortly rage on these flowers. The blood of men will flow on them, and tomorrow their sweetness will be mingled with the charnel-house of corpses . . . our corpses.

Nature has never seemed to me so moving. Tears come to my eyes. It is not fear. No, it is not that. There are times when one may be afraid. Here we realize that fear is a reflex impression, ridiculous, and above all useless; that the minutes which are left are perhaps too numbered to waste in vain sentiments.

But while I look through the mirage of nature, I have seen a small shriveled figure with trembling lips, and eyes hollowed with pain and fright; I have seen small hands — long, pale, emaciated hands — clasped before a photograph; I have heard the expression so many times, read it so many times in the letters on my breast, on my heart: " Tell me that you will come back. You are my all, father, mother, brother, child, husband; tell me that you will be careful, that you will come back to me," and a slight uncontrollable, nervous trembling takes hold of me; but no one can see it.

The blast of the whistle — the final order — rings out. I find myself on the slope without knowing how I came there, in the midst of the others, beside the lieutenant, at my post.

Under a protecting storm of our " 75's " we advance towards our objective. The battalion has already crossed the first line of the Boche trenches without resistance.

All nervousness is gone now. I am very cool. The third wave advances in front of us in good order, in step, without heavy losses. We march in their wake.

There, thirty yards away, on the right is a knoll. That is our objective which we must occupy to prevent the enemy's reserves coming up.

We draw nearer; my heart begins to beat violently. It is nervousness. It is the beginning of the end.

Suddenly a sharp noise stops me; then another beside my ear. Instinctively I throw myself on the hill. A sergeant falls near me without a word. He is dead, a bullet in the middle of his forehead.

We are under the fire of a machine gun which defends the approach to our objective.

The bullets whistle in a continuous buzz around us. A sharp burning pain, like a sting; a cry stops in my throat, on my very lips. I fall.

The fusillade rages. To the right, to the left, around me everywhere, bullets bury themselves in the ground. I am wounded, but where? All my limbs are numb.

I feel a hand take mine and grasp it. It is the lieutenant, who has already come running to me.

"Good-by for the present."

"For the present."

It is nothing. A stone hurled violently by the bursting of a shell has hit me in the back. It has just missed killing me. I remain there a moment without being able to get my breath back or to get up.

All around there is an incessant rain of bullets and shrapnel.

However, I can't remain there right in the barrage. I make an effort to catch up with the company. My fall which took only a few seconds has put considerable distance between the wave and me. More than three hundred yards separate us.

I want to run after it, but I can't.

A greenish cloud rolls like a flood over the plain. The enemy is launching gas.

Some one out of breath joins me. It is Morin who took a message to the major. He is now carrying an order to the lieutenant.

"This is dangerous."

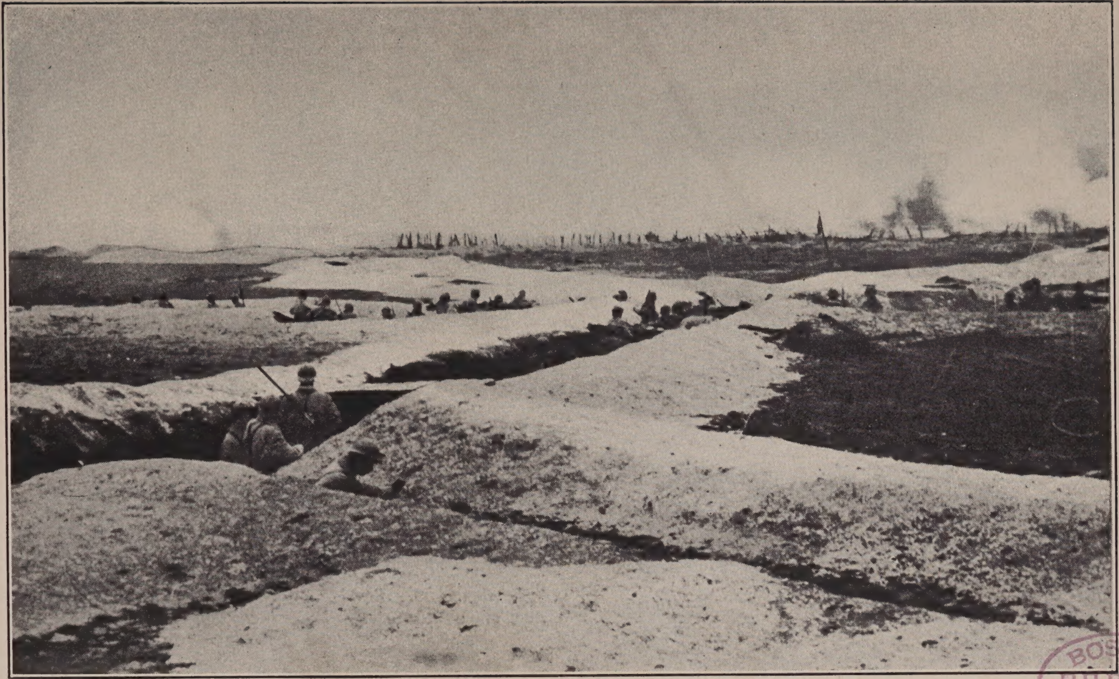
"One might think so."

"Commandant Courier was just killed getting out of the parallel."

"No?"

"A '155' square in the chest. It killed two officers and five men. I 've a splinter in my thigh and one in my shoulder."

We walk along side by side as fast as we can,



The Attack *See page 225*

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but slowly nevertheless. We can't do anything else. We get tangled in the barbed wire; we stumble over corpses; we fall headlong into shell holes. The mud covers the mica in my mask.

A hundred yards in front of us the company reaches its objective, the hill and the Boche blockhouse.

Two sections have rushed in and are already in action.

Two more sections throw themselves into a crater more to the left opposite a clump of trees which is still held by the enemy.

Suddenly there is a terrific explosion, and the most violent clap of thunder that can be imagined sends us head over heels.

The ground trembles, the earth cracks, and through the crevices oozes a black smoke which envelops us. Everything is black. Are we entombed?

A mine has been exploded near us in the entrance. They shout; they cry. Belts of cartridges burst in the furnace. A swarm of bees seems to fly over our heads. The blockhouse has just blown up with our two sections. It was mined.

When the smoke lifts from the overturned ground, all we can see are corpses scattered about. Our comrades . . . our dead!

The enemy wanted to prevent our companies capturing and organizing it.

We try to see something from the shell hole where we remain. It is certain death even to try to raise the head. The bullets glance off the ground.

Morin wants to join the lieutenant and finish his errand in spite of everything, but where is he? Was he in the blockhouse? We can't see anyone in front of us.

Our waves of infantry have turned to the right, invested Herbècourt, and taken it. They are now fighting in the village. We judge from the columns of smoke that there are fires. The noise of the explosion of grenades reaches us.

But in front of us there is no one. It is a breach. The breach our company ought to have held firmly closed with its machine guns during the attack on the village.

The enemy knows this without a doubt. He has calculated his blow well. He has succeeded. He is going to launch out from the clump of trees and take our companies in the rear.

Indeed that is the case. Groups of gray worms crawl out of the thicket. They reach the ridge. They are a hundred yards from us. There is no one to stop them. But where are our two sections? Are they wiped out too?

" My old Morin, we 're done for."

Our hands clasp in a fraternal farewell. In three minutes the Boches will be on us. They will kill us pitilessly. We hold our revolvers ready, fingers on the trigger. At least we won't go alone.

They stand up now and shout. They are going to make a dash.

"*Vorwaerts! Gottfordam isch!*"

The harsh sound of the command and the oath comes to us clearly.

They dash forward to take the crater.

But almost at the end, at scarcely fifty yards, the four guns of our two sections, hidden in the shell holes, receive them with a withering fire.

The Boche line cracks, breaks; groups of men fall in heaps, like puppets.

Our guns fire constantly.

The Boche line wavers, hesitates, the ranks thin out. We can hear the dead sound of the falling bodies.

We laugh and laugh; we applaud, crying like fools:

"There are our two sections. Bravo!"

But behind the files that fall are others in greater numbers which advance in close ranks, one after another.

Our fire is slower. Our munitions are exhausted — the gun crew is firing all the cartridges of their carbines.

The assailants realize this. Some of the groups have already reached our emplacements. An incredibly tall and strong officer hurls himself on a gun. It is Marseille's gun. It has been silent just a moment, but it has n't finished its task for all that.

Marseille tears the barrel from the tripod, and using it as a gigantic mace beats the officer to death.

A terrible hand to hand fight follows. The lieutenant, wounded, dripping with blood, on his knees on the parapet, stops the demoralized enemy with shots from his revolver.

But this heroic defense of the breach can't last long. Most of our men have fallen and most of the rest are wounded. The enemy is still advancing, in close ranks now. He is going to get by . .

Then, from the support trench, which the . . . first Territorials hold, a company dashes out like a whirlwind, with an irresistible dash. It throws the mass of the enemy into disorder, and it is soon just a mob, which turns its back and flees frantically, as fast as it can go, falling under our rifle fire, and strewing the ground with corpses and innumerable wounded who drag themselves along on the ground begging for mercy.

CHAPTER XVIII

WITH ORDERS

THERE he is, Captain," shouted a non-commissioned intelligence officer.

"It is necessary," said the captain, "to take this order to the lieutenant commanding your company at once. You 'll find that it 's only a promenade. Go ahead."

A promenade!

From the Château de Cappy where the headquarters of our brigade were all one could see that morning on the horizon was smoke and flame.

The earth trembles as though there were some sort of a fanciful, continuous earthquake.

Since the attack began and our waves crossed the first Boche lines, the enemy's artillery planted on the heights of Cléry, Mont St. Quentin, Barleux has sent over a formidable barrage to prevent all possibility of the arrival of reinforcements.

It hopes to cut off in the rear the forces engaged in the attack, to encircle them, to exterminate or capture them. A wall of shell and fire separates them from us. Three hundred yards in front of the heights of the La Vache woods from La Vierge clear to Dompierre and Fontaine-les-Cappy, it is one uninterrupted explosion of great shells which throw to great heights enormous masses of earth and stones almost as though they were gushing from the bowels of the earth.

This waste of shells is further beautified with "tear" shells and asphyxiating shells and is designed to stop all attempts at passing the barrage.

This is the delightful place in which I have to take a "promenade."

I adjust my mask, make sure that the straps are on, and secure my steel helmet by the chin strap.

With the order in the pocket of my revolver case, a solid boxwood baton in my hand, I start towards the fiery furnace.

The communication trench which I try to follow is impracticable. It is partly blown in and such dugouts as are still tenable are full of wounded fleeing from the zone of combat. They crowd in pell-mell in their efforts to find a breathing place.

Then, sooner or later, after the La Vache woods are passed, one has to walk absolutely unprotected so one might as well go at once.

Few projectiles are falling here on the great quarry as yet, but only a few shots too long or too short from the great guns aimed at the ammunition depot at Froissy.

The barrage is further on. . . .

As one approaches it, the earth and air seem to tremble even more. . . .

One walks on a moving wave, as if tossed about on the bridge of a ship. A displacement of air throws one to the right, the next one to the left. They march swaying like drunken men.

I approach. . . .

Some steps in front of what was the " Servian " trench is the beginning of Hell.

Men, officers, and stretcher-bearers are crouching in holes in half-blown-in saps, waiting for a lull which for several hours has not come.

The sick and wounded, haggard and frightened, do not dare to make a move outside the precarious shelters which even the smallest shell would destroy and bury them alive.

A Zouave, with a swarthy face and a profile like a medallion, gesticulates and shouts. A long gash cuts his forehead from the arch of his eyebrows to the ear; the blood flows thick and black on his cheek and runs into his beard. He waves a rag on the end of a stick.

"The noubah! the noubah! It is the noubah! They are going to dance. You 'll dance with me, won't you?"

And he runs towards the bombs, laughing a frightful laugh which makes me shudder. Poor fool! A hole opens under his feet. He falls. Perhaps the fall will save him from a mortal wound.

Some Colonials, fatalists, accustomed to so many other storms — for two years they have been in the hottest part of all the engagements — talk coolly under a dugout which is still intact. They squat on their crossed legs and smoke peacefully. The smoke from their pipes, rising in slow easy curves, seems to set at defiance the frightful cataclysm which rages around us.

A stretcher-bearer, a priest, whom I think I recognize, is dressing a wounded man who has escaped in some way from the furnace and who faints in his arms. Intent on his bandaging he seems to have no idea of the Hell two steps away. He gives him the same care with the same imperturbable calm that he would in the absolute security of some faraway ambulance.

A staff-officer, a captain, is observing the ground through a glass. As is my case, he is carrying an urgent order which cannot wait.

He looks at me and understands from my attitude that I, too, must go on.

"Shall we try it?"

"If you wish, Captain."

"In case of accident, my pocketbook is in the pocket of my jacket, here . . . you will take it to the officer of details of the . . . first Zouaves."

"Mine is here, Captain."

I indicate the left pocket of my tunic.

"All right."

"Let 's go."

He grasps my hand and we advance flat on the ground, bounding from one shell hole to another farther ahead.

We compel our bodies to take the shape of the excavation in which we burrow.

Above our heads is a continuous whistling of shells, cutting like a sword, and the constant djji-djji of the projectiles which tear up the ground.

The explosions are so frequent that we perceive only one infernal noise under a rain of fire.

We crawl through an indescribable chaos, in a field of terror, in the midst of a pungent, fetid smoke. We reach the first German trench which we conquered yesterday morning. We jump into it; we are dripping with perspiration; our clothes are in rags. Our first act is to raise our masks for we are stifling under them.

The asphyxiating shells now fall behind us, and their noxious gas blows in another direction away from us. We stop for some seconds to regain our breaths. We must go on.

As we are about to climb out on the field again, I see one of our couriers coming at full speed. I must wait for him and learn where my company is.

But he stops, leans backwards, and his hands contract and seem to try to pull something from his breast. He falls inert.

I crawl towards him. A spasm still shakes him. He looks at me.

"The company! Where is the company?"

"—— Maisonnette ——" he murmurs in a faraway breath, then, with an effort, his shaking hand reaches towards his jacket, but without success.

"Sergeant-Major . . . there . . . there . . . to my mother . . . in La Ciotat . . ."

"Yes, *mon vieux*, yes."

He is dead. I am trembling but I search for his pocketbook. It is sewed in a handkerchief and in drawing it out it is spotted with blood — his blood. I shall send it to his mother just that way. It is forbidden, but what difference does that make? I have promised.

La Maisonnette! It is still three miles, perhaps more. I'll never get there! The staff-officer leaves me; he is going to the La Chapitre woods to the left.

We grasp hands once more.

"Thanks."

Yes, thanks! Together we have done a most difficult thing — we have passed through a barrage.

Now, I go on across that terrible plateau, alone.

Alone!

If a splinter of a shell hits me, no one will be with me during my last moments to listen to my final wishes. I continue my way under the rain of shells.

Why I have not already been blown to pieces or buried I do not know. How little one feels in the face of this formidable power!

I turn around. On both sides and behind me there is no one! I am in a desert in which a hail of fire falls. Will I get there?

At every step I cross, touch, jump over, as I run against them, formless corpses, cut to pieces, or doubled into knots.

Perhaps in a moment I shall be like them, disemboweled and my brains running out, or like those over there buried under rubbish and dirt. I can see a foot here, an arm there; they are entombed forever. I shall be listed among the missing, and my family and those who love me will cling to this shred of hope — that the missing is perhaps not dead.

I go on steadily.

Abruptly, I experience a nervous reaction. I laugh . . . I become a fatalist! And after? . . . I shall not be alone. That 's the common lot of millions of men.

What is going to happen will happen. Forward.

And I crawl on anew, thinking of everything else — a mass of things a hundred leagues away; trifles; paltry trifles. I surprise myself by making plans which I shall realize after the war — when that is over! And, nevertheless, death hovers over me constantly, threatening, and I am much nearer to it than life.

A trench opens before me; it is not badly demolished. I enter it and find that it is an old one taken from the enemy this morning. German words indicate directions. They abandoned all their belongings. On a plank in a sentry post is a superb pair of prismatic field glasses. I pick them up — what use are they to me? I throw them down at once.

I have enough to look out for close by without trying to see what 's happening farther away.

"*Nach Maisonnette.*"

This direction before my eyes fascinates me.

"To Maisonnette." Well, I'm on the right track. If the trench continues like this I have some chance of arriving there: *nach Maisonnette*.

I mark the directions at each turn of the trench, at each branch.

A big shell bursts on my left and utterly destroys the whole of the wall behind me.

I take another course. The devil! Suppose that should be wrong.

I reach a sort of crater made up of stones and trunks of trees blown apart and broken, in one complete tangle.

It would hardly be wise to stay here, for the crater is hammered full of shell holes.

A voice comes out of the ground between the stones, at my feet.

"Oh, good morning, Margis. Keep to the right; the first street to the left is Peronne."

I recognize the joking voice and constant laugh of Sub-Lieutenant Delpos.

I have arrived; the company is here!

This hole is Maisonnette!

All right! . . .

And I jump into the protection of the bottom of the sap.

At last! ! !

White wine, brandy, fine preserves. Sub-Lieutenant Delpos never lacks for anything even in the most tragic hours of his life.

He makes an elegant and comfortable dugout out of the most filthy hole.

Ten miles from the living world, six feet under ground, in the midst of the shell fire, ten feet from the enemy, he offers me, with a laugh, a meal which is prodigious under the circumstances.

Coharé makes coffee on a burner and he flavors it with brandy.

We talk of many things, of a thousand things, all a hundred leagues removed from the war. We talk about Marseilles.

Sub-Lieutenant Delpos is a lover of its picturesqueness, of its color, its sun — we are in a deep sap lighted by a smoky candle — the sun means something to us, something fairylike and superhuman. To think that at that hour there are people living under clear skies, coming and going and breathing the strong sea breeze, and drinking in with their eyes that perpetual delight — a sunset on the rocks of Frioul!

And the women of Marseilles! They are the quintessence of France, revivified by the air of the Mediterranean. Just think, *mon cher,* of a villa perched in the pines, facing the sea, in the valley of L'Oriol, with a brunette that I know,

. . . ! . . . . !

" Oh, I forget, I must present you to the other gentlemen. Come."

We emerge from the sap and come out in broad daylight. In a crater organized in the expectation of a probable counter attack, guarded by the strongest men of the section, twelve German prisoners are stretched out in the mud.

Some of them stand up automatically at the appearance of an officer and assume a rigid military attitude.

" Look at that rabble with their blessed faces like professors of natural history or like sacristans mumbling their prayers. Who would think to look at them that they are such cynical brutes? "

" But I forgot. You speak German! . . . Try and get something out of them."

So I ask them where they come from.

No one replies. Their eyes remain hostile and timid and full of fear.

They distrust one another; informing is the common practice in their ranks.

I look at one in particular, and, taking him by the arm,

"*Dü! wohen bist dü dann?*"

"*Aus München. . . .*"

From Munich. Munich! I passed the best days of my youth there. Its splendid life, the magic of its lakes, the first iridescent snows of the Tyrol reflecting in their dark waters, the intoxication of its music, Munich! the city of my dreams! The mystic grayish tints of the inns more smoky even than those of Auerbach but lighter, the impressive harmony of the statues, its incomparable museums, the June evenings on the Isar and the blue sunsets of the Propylées. Munich! And this man in rags, this tatterdemalion speaks to me of Munich.

Well, Margis, are you wandering?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. As a matter of fact I was woolgathering."

And I come back to cruel reality.

"Since you must return to the brigade at once, you can take this crowd to the provost. I 'll give you four men. That will be enough."

" All right, Lieutenant, but I 'll not guarantee to deliver them whole. It 's a bad neighborhood. It rains shells."

He looks at them and they are ready. All they have to do is to group themselves.

" Go ahead, au revoir, — and a safe return."

" Nun jetz Vorwaerts!"

We go back along the road I came by this morning. The artillery fire has let up a little. As far as the crossing of the roads from Biaches to Herbècourt, we march along without much risk, but beyond there we are taken anew by a crossfire from the batteries of Barleux and Hem, and by the fire of a cursed machine gun. It seems to be hidden in the ruins of Flaucourt, but our artillery has not been able to spot it yet and silence it.

My twelve prisoners march along ahead silently with bowed shoulders. They understand that they must march along peacefully at the same pace as the four big fellows who form the escort, and that once out of this zone their lives are saved.

We reach without incident the old road which cuts the Le Signal woods, and get back on the road from Herbècourt to Éclusier. An orchard here which before the attack was a signal station has not suffered much. The dugouts are whole and I stop my troop to look after my leg which has begun to bleed.

A little while ago, as I was crossing some barbed wire entanglements, I felt a tear but I thought it was of no consequence. But now the blood has soaked through the drawers and trousers. I tear off a strip from my package of dressings and put on a bandage which stops the bleeding until we reach the next dressing station.

I have hardly put my equipment on again than I hear beyond me in the road an infernal noise of scrap iron, oaths and cries.

I jump up.

It is our movable kitchen driven by Gondran. Yesterday, it went ahead to Herbècourt on premature orders. To-day, it was right in the barrage. Now that the long expected lull has come, the lieutenant is sending it back to Froissy.

On the way back Gondran met four wounded men who were getting to the rear only with the greatest difficulty, and he took them on his rickety wagon. This torpedo, with its big sheet-iron smokestack which is full of holes and twisted, does n't look much like an ambulance. Instead, one might think it was some archaic engine of war of the Gauls.

Phoebe and Lidoire, the two lean hacks which drag it, are marked and cut by the harness and their legs are bent from pulling this badly balanced weight.

Suddenly, the bombardment, which seemed to have ceased, begins again. First two shots, then repeated more and more rapidly, and only in our direction. A shower of splinters beats around us, wounds the two horses and cuts the reins.

They run away at a mad pace with wild plunges through the fields. Gondran is wounded in the hands and is helpless; he clings to the smokestack; the wounded are tossed about. They shout from the pain of their re-opened wounds and hang on as best they can to the handle of the kettle.

The speed of the two horses becomes giddy. They head for the quarry at a gallop. A hundred yards more and they will inevitably fall into the canal, a fall of more than fifty yards. That would mean their utter destruction.

I have no choice of ways in which to save the five men.

With six shots from my revolver I kill one horse and throw the other to the ground. The kitchen comes to a stop twenty yards from the cliff.

But danger is not averted by any manner of means. Shells follow us. From some faraway place an observer must have taken us for a "75" getting into position and he tries to destroy us. We abandon the kitchen which is now almost completely done for, and as fast as we can, saved by some miracle from the shells, which double in intensity, we throw ourselves into the first trench we find.

I find the Territorials and the provost at the great quarry and I hand my prisoners over to him.

It is only a step from there to headquarters. I arrive at six o'clock.

Captain Chatain is outside the door, and I give him the reply he is waiting for.

He runs it over with a smile of satisfaction.

"Everything went all right, Sergeant-Major?"

" Yes, Captain."

" Good. Did n't I tell you that it would simply be a promenade . . . but I 'll recommend you for a citation."

Half an hour later I was snoring soundly in a dugout.

CHAPTER XIX

A WREATH

WE fell back in good order — in as good order as our wounds and the enemy's artillery fire permitted.

There is a roll call of the company, now reduced in numbers by half, in the ruins of Dompierre, now cleared out, conquered and organized.

None of the two sections surprised in the explosion of the mine came back.

There are great gaps in the ranks of the other two, especially among the non-commissioned officers. One sergeant out of four and two or three corporals are seriously wounded.

As names are called and there is no response, we look around as though to search better. Lips seem to murmur, " What, he too? " Eyes search the distance, the turn of the road at the entrance of the village, as if they still expect to see him come. But no one comes. They will never come again.

The lieutenant has to furnish all possible information about each one missing.

" Did you see him fall? Who was near him? Was he wounded? Do you think he was killed? Did he stay there motionless? "

There were as many inexact replies as there were questions. No one knew exactly or could know exactly whether the fallen was killed or wounded; appearances are deceitful. In the uproar of battle, he who seems dead is not even touched. Another may have had to stay hidden a long time to avoid being killed or made a prisoner.

Opposite the name of each absent one the quartermaster writes:

" Missing the . . . presumably killed at . . ."

After the roll call we separate silently. The most severely wounded are at the dressing stations, and several are discharged by the ambulances from the rear: Sergeant Pierron had four fingers of his right hand blown off; Sergeant Durosiers with a shoulder broken by a bit of shell; Corporal Goutelle shot through the thigh, and has lost a lot of blood.

We accompany them as far as the ambulances which take them to the casualty clearing stations.

Adjutant Dotant and Sergeant Lace take the initiative in buying a wreath and take up a collection among the men of their sections.

" Lieutenant, if you will allow us, we are going to buy a wreath at Harbonnières and this evening two of us will go and place it on our comrades."

Too moved to answer, the lieutenant acquiesces with a nod.

Morin and I, the only two who are not wounded, offer to carry it. Our errand is not without danger; but we start off at nightfall.

The wreath is light but large, and its width makes it difficult to get through the narrow trenches.

We have to hold it at arms' length in certain places above our heads on the parapet and slide it along.

Its ornaments catch in the stones and the twigs.

It runs serious dangers before it reaches its destination.

At Herbècourt the trench stops some yards in front of the entrance to the village. It is raining shells.

The shells rage particularly on the road which runs through the village, the only one along which supplies can go. There is no longer a well-marked road. The well taken care of highway no longer exists; it is full of holes and is but one yawning crevasse more than three hundred yards long. The wagons and trucks have made a chance path in the neighboring fields. They wait at the entrance of the village, some yards from the point where the barrage persists, for a lull. When it comes, they rush like a whirlwind with a mad burst of speed, and it is a miracle that they are not crushed. All one hears are oaths, cries, blows; wagons lock together, horses fall and get up at once; all this in the twinkling of an eye. Thirty wagons pass between two shells.

We, too, make a dash and reach the other end without much risk. The danger is greater from the autos which rush by us like meteors, graze us, and threaten a hundred times to cut us to pieces or to catch our clothes and drag us under the wheels. But the greatest danger is from the tottering walls, and the waving roofs which the rolling of the wagons brings falling down.

We reach the cemetery at the beginning of the country. It is still nearly intact. Graves are turned up; tombstones are thrown down on their sides. Its walls are holed with loopholes, which served the last defenders of the village. But the grass is not even tramped down in the corners.

"Can't we stay here five minutes to get our breath?"

"If you want to. . . . We deserve it."

A battery of "75's" held the position a few minutes ago. It has just abandoned it to get nearer the lines. The place is deserted; it is like a visit in the country at two steps from the fiery furnace. We stretch out on a mound of turf between two tombs.

It is the hour of twilight; the sky is golden; the sun on the horizon plunges into the marshes of the Somme. A fresh breeze blows through the privet hedge.

"A summer evening in the country!"

"Within the country would be more in accord with the circumstances, I think."

As if to make my punning more emphatic, four "77's" burst at the same time and smash the cemetery walls to bits.

"*Foutre!*" This expression, peculiar to Marseilles, has a significant meaning on Morin's lips.

"You have said it; the place is no longer safe."

"The battery changed its position because it had just been spotted. We are taking its place and are a target for the Boche artillery."

We make our way forward as fast as we can.

The bombardment of the abandoned position behind us continues in volleys of four shells at a time. The cemetery we just left is nothing but a ruin, a chaos from which black smoke rises.

We keep on running, each holding an end of the wreath which impedes us terribly. Although it is light, it seems heavy.

Night falls and it is very dark. We are able to advance with more security now. Yawning craters open at our feet; we risk falls and sprains at every step.

It is the dead of night when we reach the place where our company was decimated.

An immense mass of humanity fills the place with a tragic tangle of intertwined corpses. Burned with powder, licked by the flames, torn and blown to pieces, the bodies cling to the wall as if they wanted to fly from the deadly fire coming from the depths of the earth.

Indeed, planted on this host of bodies, his legs sinking in up to his knees, the body of Sergeant Bacque seems to point out the road to deliverance with a gesture. His hands hold the pickets of a cheval de frise. A shell decapitated him at the very moment when he jumped and death fixed him in this attitude.

Thin smoke still comes from the bottom of this sinister vat! It is Hell in all its horror. The men saw death coming and tried to flee, but death was victor and fixed them to the spot.

The burial of our friends would be a titanic task for our exhausted strength. We gather into a single pile the scattered bodies which the explosion hurled to a distance. With some barbed wire we hang the company's wreath on the cheval de frise which commands the great grave. It faces the Boches.

To-morrow at sunrise they can see it from their nearest trench and read on its tricolored ribbon the inscription, "To our comrades, to our brothers, from the survivors of the second company of machine guns." They will see how we pay homage to our heroes even under the threat of their shells.

The drone of a cannon sounds in the English sector in the distance. One might think that there was a tacit truce on our side to let the dead sleep more peacefully in their last sleep.

We remain there kneeling before the hecatomb. Our lips search for the prayers of our childhood to lay our dead at rest, but they have lost the habit of prayer and our memories fail at the first words. We wish a prayer which shall give their final blessing to the bodies stretched out there, but above all we want a prayer which shall give a kindly consolation in the approaching hour of anguish to those who wait — to the mothers, wives, sweethearts, who do not know, who hope and live in the dream of their joyous return. And our scepticism makes us unable to pray.

The darkness of the night is absolute.

The charnel-house of our comrades is only a dark mass in the shadows. A pungent, pestilential odor already rises; we sense the sinister rustling of the rats which slip between the bodies.

Groans rise on all sides in the darkness. Some shriek horribly in their agony; there are long wails; plaintive sing-songs call beloved names, childish words.

Death, with its accomplice, Darkness, gleans the last rebellious one who clings desperately to life.

Behind us mounts the heavy rolling of the convoys. It is the hour for the nightly supplies. The autos dash along on the torn up roads in the endeavor to accomplish their difficult mission before the probable barrage fire begins again.

On the top of the ridge where the enemy maintains his lines for the moment, a searchlight throws its light on the ground and in the sky, in all directions, watching for aeroplanes and searching for the passing of convoys on the road. Its light passes back and forth over us several times, hitting us in the face and dazzling us. It passes back and forth, flooding the plain with its moving brilliant light. In its light we see moving forms: stretcher-bearers saving the wounded and plunderers of the dead.

Suddenly, the whizz of a shell comes our way, and a light bursts high in the air. Shrapnel launch their rain of fire and shell on the plain.

"Let 's go. . . ."

We had scarcely time to throw ourselves flat on the ground when there was a tremendous explosion. A "380" perhaps bursts on the middle of the mound of corpses and scatters it. One would think that maddened by its orgy of murder, the enemy horde wants to kill our dead anew. A geyser of blood spouts up and boils from the mound.

We try to flee but our limbs fail us. An invincible force rivets us to the spot, as we try to jump ahead.

Morin utters a hoarse cry, a cry like an animal that is being slaughtered. A corpse was thrown up in the air and falls squarely on him and throws him to the ground. He is underneath, hemmed in by its shrivelled arms; streams of blood deluge him.

I try to get him out, but I can't. My hands feel around on the mangled body. I feel the shattered limbs come apart under the clothes. I pull Morin out from underneath by his arms. He remains motionless for a moment. He is stupid from the shock and fright. I shake him. The arrival of a new engine of death which explodes beside us brings him back to reality and the imminence of danger.

This time we run as fast as we can, stumbling over the debris, tripping over the dead, rolling into shell holes, tearing our clothes, hands, and faces on the barbed wire.

We flee, absolutely breathless, across old trenches which we see only when their depths yawn before our steps.

We flee haggard, in a mad delirium, terrified, pursued by the vision of our dead, of their dim faces, their torn brows, their glassy eyes, their twisted mouths, which the shells still mangle . . . which the enemy kill again in their sleep of death.

We flee encircled by the rattle of the fire which pursues us, and which with us draws near the road which we wish to reach and it to bar.

A more violent puff, and close by, grazes our heads.

"Attention! . . . Stop. . . . To earth!"

A violent shock, a heavy blow between the shoulders, a hard vice grips my body and throws me on the ground.

I fall.

I fall, and then I remember nothing more.

CHAPTER XX

DISCHARGED

"COME, *mon vieux,* swallow this; it will set you up."

A sergeant of the 88th Territorials is speaking. I see his white number as he bends over me. I swallow the contents of the cup at one draught. Ouf! it 's strong; it burns, but I feel my strength coming back.

Where am I?

I am behind a bank in a dugout cut in the side of the trench. How I got there I don't know. I have lost all idea of things.

I am anxious about Morin. They don't know, but they say that they saw stretcher-bearers pick him up.

I have received my reckoning, but I shall recover. I feel my trousers and boots heavy with a tepid dampness. I feel a shooting pain in the groin and something like a warm stream flows drop by drop.

The stretcher-bearer, Bertrand, an old college friend, now a Dominican, stops a second beside me, hurrying on to more pressing cares, to the more seriously wounded. He speaks kindly simple words, but what they are I know not. He speaks of country, the sun, my wife.

My wife, the sun, the country, the return to life, the walks as of old in the woods, in the hills, the dreams at twilight, the cherished plans, the talk of love. Life is beginning again. Yes, we will begin all that again. And it will be finer now . . . after the test.

A great relaxation comes; tears flow. I hardly suffer, but I am weak. I want to sleep.

The stretcher-bearers will come presently, as I know, at nightfall. And through the roof of boughs I see the sun die away and the stars come out.

The bombardment rolls in distant thunder; they say that it is increasing, coming nearer.

Does that mean a counter attack?

The sinister heavy blow of a great Boche shell shakes the earth of my dugout, and the leaves of my roof fall in torrents on my covering.

I already feel anxious to get away. I am afraid now. I dread the final wound which will tear me, shatter me, kill me.

It is dark night. Great drops begin to fall. It is going to rain very hard. The stretcher-bearers have come. I have to move so that they can place me on the stretcher. I feel the warm stream gush out; it is very strong this time.

And I fainted.

At the casualty clearing station at Villers an old major with a white beard gives me an injection of antitetanic serum.

Another examines my gaping wound.

"Iodine dressing, H. O. E.[1] Discharge to private life."

And an automobile takes me speedily to the station where the sanitary train waits with steam up.

The sanitary train! . . . For two days each roll of the wheels sound in my head like a great bell; and the belt which binds me seems tightened into the most atrocious notch; at each turn of the wheels, at every movement it seems to me that the stream will begin to flow again, and that this time it will all flow out until it is exhausted . . . with my life.

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[1] Hospital for the Discharged.

Then, one evening, the rolling ceased; my stretcher was unhooked and they gave me something to drink. . . . I woke up in the hospital.

A white bed, lights, nurses in white, who speak, who smile, who glide over the floors without making a noise.

Can it be true? I no longer hear the noise, the hammering of cannon, and the infernal rolling of autos and caissons. It is strange.

"Take No. 7 to the operating room," says the head doctor.

I am No. 7.

The operating room. . . . It is all bright and white; through haggard eyes I look at the shining knives, the reflection of the glass, but a sharp odor seizes me, sickens me, stifles me.

I am stifling. . . . My breath stops in my chest and no longer reaches my throat. . . . I am stifling. . . . No, I hear the bells. . . . I hear the bells. . . . How good they sound!

Is it a dream?

An anxious face, shining eyes, lips trembling with a kiss, the beautiful loved hair with its familiar perfume.

And the gentle caress on my forehead.

Both arms close about it feverishly, as if never to let it go, on this dear being who brings with her kiss: love, life, the future.

"Oh! you! you! at last! forever!"

"Yes, Georges, yes, forever. I am here."

And the nurse standing at the foot of the little brass bed smiles with tears in her eyes.

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